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ABSTRACT

Between the summers of 1986 and 1987, the Coalition on Human Needs interviewed 202 low income people to learn about their experiences with employment, education, their families, and various government programs. The interviewees showed a higher level of participation in the paid labor force than was predicted. According to those interviewed, the most important thing the government can do is to ensure that jobs are available. Most of the jobs that poor people now hold are the most marginal in terms of security, pay, benefits, and opportunity for advancement. Persons interviewed made wide use of the 15 cash benefit programs and 22 service oriented programs about which they were questioned. No single program, however, could be considered a total solution for everyone or any single family. Fifty-eight percent said they needed education, training, or both to obtain the kind of jobs they wanted or needed to support their families. Responses related to jobs and training varied somewhat in emphasis from place to place. Regional studies of the following areas are discussed: (1) Northeastern North Carolina; (2) Aliquippa, Pennsylvania; (3) San Antonio, Texas; and (4) Washington, D.C. Recommendations included increased job and training opportunities, increased public assistance and changes in processing applicants and delivering benefits, better enforcement of child support laws, and crisis management training for caseworkers. (BJV)

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HOW THE POOR WOULD REMEDY POVERTY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How The Poor Would Remedy Poverty

Between the summers of 1986 and 1987, the Coalition on Human Needs, under a grant from the Ford Foundation, interviewed 202 low income people around the country to learn about their experiences with employment, education, their families and a wide range of government programs. The purpose of the study was to inform public policy with the ideas of poor people themselves.

The sample was designed to reflect the diversity of the poverty population. Interviews were conducted by consultants familiar with the low income communities selected to represent different types of economies and population groups. The sites were Aliquippa, Pa., four rural counties of northeastern North Carolina, San Antonio, TX, and Washington, D.C.

Regardless of age, race, ethnicity, sex or place of residence, low income people interviewed showed a higher level of participation in the paid labor force and incidence of disability than statistical studies or the sampling technique would have predicted.

Since most of the questions in the survey requested open-ended responses (as opposed to multiple choice) the views contained in this report are drawn from the words of the people interviewed. There was a striking similarity in the frequency of responses to most of the questions regardless of whether the respondent was working or receiving welfare, where she or he lived, or any other variable.

What Is Poverty?

The official definition of poverty attempts to define the level of income necessary for the basic necessities of life. The formula, adjusted annually for inflation, assumes that people must first have the income to purchase a minimally nutritious food basket and, then, twice that amount for other necessities. For an average family of three, the poverty level was $8,737 in 1986.

The great majority of those interviewed (82 percent) believe government has a responsibility to help people out of poverty.

The Overall Solution

According to those interviewed, the most important thing the government can do to relieve poverty is to ensure that jobs are available. Yet, this is not the total solution because nearly half of those interviewed said they were hampered from working by age, poor health, disability or lack of substitute child care. Also, many of the poor are unskilled for jobs that would bring their incomes above the poverty line.

Improve The Quality of Jobs

Most of the jobs that poor people in the sample now hold are the most marginal in terms of security, pay, benefits and opportunity for advancement. Full-time wages averaged $5 an hour, but were insufficient to bring family income above the poverty line because few were able to work continuously all year and because those with larger families required more income to rise above the poverty line.

Sixty-three percent of the interviewees who were working said the main thing they would change about their jobs was to have either higher pay or more hours. Women were even more likely to give these answers. Women also gave more emphasis than men to the desire for opportunities for advancement.

Government Programs

Persons interviewed made wide use of the 15 cash benefit programs and 22 service oriented programs about which they were questioned. No single program, however, could be considered a total solution for everyone or any single family. Participation rates (counting past and current) ranged from two percent for sheltered workshops and five percent for meals on wheels to 85 percent for food stamps and 60 percent for Medicaid. Relatively few had ever received benefits from social insurance programs.

Almost unanimously, respondents thought each program they had participated in was helpful.

When asked the first thing they would do to change any of the programs, 43 percent said they would raise benefit levels, reduce the amount of bureaucracy, have more courteous welfare workers or make all of these changes. Another 13 percent, including many of the working poor, said eligibility rules should be relaxed. There were many other answers to this question, most of which related to increasing the effectiveness and availability of various services, including housing, health and child care, education and training.

Education And Training

The majority (58 percent) said they needed education, training or both to obtain the kinds of jobs they wanted or needed to support their families.

A large number had dropped out before completing high school. The need to go to work and support a family was the most frequent reason. Other major reasons were marriage or pregnancy; a home problem such as alcoholism; and loss of interest in school. Young adults often said they didn't realize the importance of education until it was too late.

Once out of school, many respondents pin their hopes for a good job on training programs. Half had been involved in training programs in the past, but most of them did not get a job as a result. They said the program would have been more helpful if it had been linked directly to a job or had offered a higher level of skill training.

Regional Variations

Responses related to jobs and training varied somewhat in emphasis from one place to another. In Aliquippa, a small town devastated by a plant closing, for example, ex-steelworkers felt they were highly skilled as auto mechanics or carpenters but the town was left with such a shrunken economic base that it couldn't afford to employ such skills.

In San Antonio and Washington, the low income population is relegated to the lowest level service jobs although the local economies are doing well and unemployment rates are relatively low. People in these places lacked the education, training or credentials to compete for higher paying jobs.

In rural North Carolina, higher paying jobs have always been scarce. Now that small farming is more difficult, the younger, more skilled and more mobile of the population has fled. Those who remain struggle to get by on assistance payments which, under state control, rank among the lowest in the country. Those who work are sometimes over-qualified for the few jobs that exist in poultry processing or small manufacturing.

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CHAPTER ONE

People, Places And Policies: A Call For Different Approaches

by Susan Rees

It is impossible to describe a typical "poor person." The poor are women, men and children. They are of all ages and all races. They live in the North, the South, rustic country areas and booming cosmopolitan centers. Some used to be well-off. Some have been poor all their lives. Many live near the edge of the official poverty line, slipping in and out of the statistics as the economy and personal circumstances change.

Despite all these differences, poor people have much in common and have similar views about how to alleviate poverty.

People living beneath the poverty line, like others, are concerned about the well-being of their children and families. They want their children to get an education and have a decent standard of living. The incidence of disability and illness is higher than normal among the poor, but most have shared the common experience of having worked for a living at least some time in their lives.

These are some of the findings of interviews conducted over the past year with 202 low income persons in four locations across the country. The study was designed to allow people with poverty level incomes to describe, in their own words, their lives and their feelings about government policies intended to help them.

Regardless of their personal circumstances, those interviewed shared similar opinions of what steps would help remedy poverty. The view that good jobs are the ultimate solution to poverty was shared by whites and blacks, people in small towns and inner cities, homemakers and ex-steelworkers, welfare recipients and the working poor. At the same time, when people are living in poverty, they think that the government should help because, as one person said, "It's the government's moral responsibility."

Different types of people need different types of assistance to get out of poverty, but they have similar needs for support when times are bad. In big cities and the rural south, whites and blacks, women and men saw the present welfare system as inadequate, unnecessarily bureaucratic and insensitive—but helpful.

Impact Of Local Economies

What does an ex-steel town near Pittsburgh have in common with an isolated part of rural North Carolina? And what distinguishes them from Washington, D.C., and San Antonio?

The study found subtle differences, linked to the state of the local economy, in the characteristics of the population interviewed and the forms of assistance they need.

For different reasons, both the area surrounding Ahoskie, N.C., and the town of Aliquippa, Pa., are economically underdeveloped. Under-development is a recent phenomenon in Aliquippa which until a few years ago had the world's largest steel mill. It has always been the case in this part of North Carolina, on the fringe of Appalacia, where farming has been the principal industry and share-cropping a part of the region's history. Lack of economic diversity and geographic isolation have made residents of both areas more vulnerable to certain economic trends and shocks.

Employment opportunities in both regions now are scarce, and jobs held by poor people are not sufficient to provide a family with the bare necessities (the definition of poverty). Residents of these areas who have a high degree of mobility, young people and many of those with more education and skills, have fled.

Those who remain are the least mobile—the elderly, the ill, poor families (many of them female-headed), and those nearing retirement who have fewer chances of starting a new career and can't afford to sell or abandon a home. Many people who still live in these areas were poor in the past, but in ways they have become poorer as the community around them has become poorer. Those who depend on public benefits and services to survive find their communities hard-pressed to provide help when the economy is, or turns, sour.

In Washington and San Antonio, on the other hand, the economy is relatively healthy. Both have sizable federal payrolls and growing high-tech and tourism industries. The problem for the poor in these cities is very much an inability to compete for better jobs due to a lack of credentials, education, training, child care and transportation.

The jobs available to poor people in these cities are concentrated in low-paying occupations. They are often part-time or seasonal and carry few if any fringe benefits. Typical jobs for the poor in these cities are as hotel maids or construction laborers.

Can Employment Solve Poverty?

The health of the economy, the availability of jobs and the quality of those jobs are of extreme importance to low income persons in the Coalition survey. Even those not in the labor force because of health, old age or family responsibilities see the larger economy as a major factor in determining their well-being and that of their neighbors.

However, those interviewed described why a full employment economy may never fully solve the problem of poverty. First, even if jobs are available in every part of the country, many are not sufficient to lift families out of poverty. Secondly, many of the poor simply cannot join the labor force. A booming economy will be of little help to them unless its rewards are shared to a degree never before experienced in this country.

Recent studies further illuminate the situation faced by those interviewed. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that 90 percent of the net new jobs created by 1995 will be in service sectors, which will employ one-fourth of the U.S. labor force. The Midwest and areas dependent on single firms or industries—communities such as two of the survey sites—will be the most likely to have a continued loss of jobs.

The fastest growing fields, according to the BLS, will be business services (computer software, management consulting, temporary help, and security and janitorial contracted services), retail and wholesale trade, restaurants, medical services (especially in nursing homes and home health agencies), professional services (legal, engineering, auditing, bookkeeping), new construction, hotels and credit agencies and financial brokerages.

Many of the new jobs will require education and skill levels higher than those possessed by most of today's poor. Secretary of Labor William Brock has said, "There will be employment for everyone that wants it and has developed their talents to the degree they can . . . the ability to reason, to think, to constantly upgrade your skills by being flexible."

However, the largest occupational growth in terms of absolute numbers (as opposed to rate of growth), the BLS reports, will be in occupations traditionally occupied by poor people—waitresses, janitors, home health aides and check-out clerks, for example. Many of these jobs, as the survey showed, pay low wages, are part-time, seasonal or subject to frequent lay-offs, and carry few if any fringe benefits.

Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, in a study for the Joint Economic Committee, say that 58 percent of all new jobs and 50 percent of all service sector jobs created between 1979 and 1984 paid less than $7,000 a year in 1984 dollars. (Even jobs created in "high-tech" fields during the same period left 12 percent of their workers earning less than $7,000 a year.)

The question for the poor and their children, then, is twofold. First, what will happen to those who cannot join the paid labor force? And, second, will the others be able to gain access to higher paying jobs or, at least, receive more income from the jobs they do get?

The Role Of Welfare Programs

Even if all the poor who can work could get jobs which would bring them above the poverty line, there is still the question of poverty for those who cannot work. Basic welfare benefits for poor families with children, the elderly and disabled generally do not bring recipients close to even poverty-level income.

For the most part, states control benefit levels and eligibility standards for basic cash assistance programs. In Aid to Families With Dependent Children, states have considerable discretion. In the basic cash program for the elderly, blind and disabled, Supplemental Security Income, federal standards are stronger, and the basic federal portion of the benefit is indexed for inflation. An analysis by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities shows that the median state AFDC benefit is only 41 percent of the poverty line, or $4,550 for a family of four. The maximum federal SSI benefit now equals only 75 percent of the poverty line or, $4,032 for an elderly or disabled individual. Only approximately 46 percent of SSI recipients receive a state supplement. In 1986, the median state supplement was $36 per month for an elderly person living independently.

Many eligible persons do not receive benefits they are entitled to under the law. One-third of those eligible for food stamps, 35 percent of those eligible for SSI, and 18 percent of those eligible for AFDC do not participate in the programs. There are several possible explanations. The most frequent reason given by low income persons during the interviews for this study was that they screen themselves out of the programs because they think they are ineligible. They are also well aware that application procedures are extremely complex, time-consuming and laden with documentation requirements. Some said the difficulty of the process kept them from applying for benefits which they needed.

Future Policy Directions

The purpose of this study was to obtain poor people's ideas about what would help alleviate poverty in general and improve their personal circumstances in particular. It was not to gather their opinions on specific existing proposals but to take a longer-term view unbound by current political and fiscal constraints.

Inevitably, however, the study will be used to see how poor people might evaluate current "welfare reform" proposals. The temptation will be especially great because pending legislation revolves around the "welfare-to-work" concept, and much of what poor people told us involved the importance of employment. What they had to say, however, goes far beyond the relatively limited education, training and employment services now under discussion for AFDC recipients. First, the proposed programs would help a relatively small portion of the total population in poverty because they focus on AFDC recipients. Single people, childless couples, most two-parent families, older people, the disabled and most of the working poor would not be helped by AFDC reform. Secondly, unless the program truly contributed to the education, skills and job opportunities of AFDC participants, it could merely push recipients, most of them single mothers, from poverty-level benefits to poverty-level wages.

If the views of poor people are to be taken seriously, policymakers at all levels would devote their attention to the following goals:

- A living family wage, at least basic health care and a chance to advance for those occupying the lowest level jobs in society.
- Economic development, targeted on under-developed communities, sufficient to give them a sound base from which to employ all who are able to work.
- Education and training sufficient to equip the poor to compete on an equal footing with others for the "better" jobs in the economy.
- Public assistance program(s) that adequately meet the needs of those not working in the paid labor force and that minimize bureaucratic procedures and discriminatory treatment.

Specific policies and strategies to reach each of these goals should be debated and refined. Many avenues—old, new and yet-to-be-discovered—could be taken in each area. They might include new government programs, regulations requiring different types of private actions, enactment of incentives, public education programs, or the involvement of private nonprofit organizations. The goal of a living wage, for example, might be achieved by increasing the minimum wage, expanding the existing tax credit available to working poor families, creating a direct government wage subsidy, and/or enabling more working families to qualify for public assistance. A public education strategy could be devised to alert the public to businesses that do not pay their workers a living wage. Each strategy will have different political ramifications and ripple effects to be considered.

This study lays out the ideas of poor people on a whole range of issues, some of which go beyond the four points listed above. They have implications for education, health, housing and social service policy. Both public and private decision-makers should find them of use. Besides informing national policy, they will also be of interest in the regions where interviews were conducted and in states and localities that have similar populations and economic structures.

CHAPTER TWO

The Poor Speak For Themselves

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the study was to obtain policy-related observations from poor people in their own words and on a wide range of issues. Interviews were conducted with 202 low income people in four locations. Major themes were then refined and clarified in focus group meetings of approximately ten low income persons, some of whom had been interviewed earlier.

The approach differed from public opinion polls, statistical analyses and most academic research designed to inform public policy. The intent was to go beyond the numbers and statistical calculations which frequently are used as a basis for governmental decisions. Instead, the survey presents concrete ideas from the very people whom social policy is supposed to address. While the data is qualitative, it is more specifically oriented to policy questions than other anecdotal studies which mainly describe "what it's like to be poor." And, unlike public opinion polls, the interviews avoided giving a pre-selected list of multiple choice answers.

The survey instrument consisted of 93 questions, about half asking for discreet answers (e.g. age, sex, income, participation in various government programs). The other half elicited open-ended responses. Interviewers were required to take verbatim notes, and responses were coded after the interview. The instrument was tested in Washington, D.C., in the summer of 1986. Before using it in other locations, the questionnaire was revised to clarify some questions and eliminate redundancy. Washington interviews were then integrated with the rest of the sample, with the exception of questions which were omitted or significantly re-worded in the second stage of the study.

Interviewers were required to take notes on each open-ended question, using the respondent's own words to the greatest extent possible. The length of responses depended on how much the respondent had to say. The average interview took two hours. In addition to notes on each question, interviewers wrote a one- to two-page summary highlighting the issues emphasized by the respondent. Interviews were tape recorded (with the respondent's permission) so that they could be reviewed during the analysis and report-writing stages. Coded answers were reviewed by Coalition staff and entered into a computer so that tallies would reveal the frequency of various types of responses and comparisons could be made between the four locations and subgroups. Responses to most questions could be categorized into approximately ten types of answers, although several required as many as 23 codes.

The written analysis, thus, was able to focus on the points that were made, in various ways, by the greatest numbers of people. Quotes were then retrieved to illustrate the nuances of the most frequent responses and, occasionally, to draw attention to a unique point that perhaps only one person mentioned. The last four chapters on each of the sites contain many quotes from the interviews.

Sample Design

The sample was designed to reflect, to the greatest extent possible, the characteristics of the poverty population in the United States. Variables included age, race, sex, employment status, geographic location and urban-rural place of residence. In each site, a quota was established for the approximate number of people to be interviewed representing certain variables.

In addition, site selection was based on the desire to highlight particular populations or issues in the current policy debate. In Washington, for example, it was primarily black, inner-city welfare recipients, most of them female heads of household. In Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, it was the "new poor," mainly white, two-parent families, who formerly had high-paying industrial jobs. In North Carolina, it was rural poverty which often is characterized by a dependence on low-paying small manufacturing or farm-related employment. In San Antonio, it was to examine poverty in thriving Sunbelt cities of the Southwest, as well as the growing Hispanic population that will soon become America's largest minority.

Another consideration was the fact that the characteristics of those living beneath the poverty line at any one time are in some cases quite different from those who are poor for long periods of time. Blacks, for example, make up a larger portion of the persistently poor than the poor at any given time. The same is true for disabled persons and residents of the South.

For this reason, the quota for interviewees with some characteristics was set between the percentages of all who are poor at any one time and those persistently poor. These features were from the most recent (March 1985) U.S. Census data, (*Characteristics of the Population Below the Poverty Level: 1984*) and from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (Corcoran, Duncan, Gurin and Gurin, "The Causes and Persistence of Poverty," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 1985). The latter is an analysis of poverty of a representative sample of the U.S. population over the period from 1969–78. Those defined as "persistently poor" in this study had been poor for eight or more out of ten years. Only 20 percent of the poverty population remains in poverty continuously for that length of time, however.

The following chart compares the make-up of the sample with the characteristics, where available, determined by the Census Bureau and the persistence of poverty study.

Characteristics Of Sample Compared To Other Analyses
(Percent)

	Sample	Persistently Poor	Poor at Any One Time
White (non-black)	35	38	68
Black	42	62	28
Spanish Origin	23	NA	16
Employed	55	NA	49
Receiving AFDC or Food Stamps	51	NA	37
Female Adults	59	61	54
South	50	68	40
Center city/urban	50	21	43
Non-metropolitan	50	NA	42
(Rural/Farm)	(25)	33	(21)

Sources:
"Causes and Persistence of Poverty" and U.S. Census Bureau.
Definitions of variables are not strictly comparable.

Identification Of Respondents

Team leaders and interviewers at each site identified people to interview through community organizations, neighbors, churches, food pantries, sheltered workshops and a variety of other non-profit social service agencies. Going through public welfare agencies was purposely avoided because not all of the poor receive public assistance and so that respondents would not think interviewers were public officials checking up on them.

Those who helped interviewers identify respondents usually could only guess that their family income was beneath the poverty level. In setting up appointments, interviewers attempted to screen out those whose income was higher. More detailed information was obtained during the interviews, but, as other researchers, including the Census Bureau, have found, income verification is extremely difficult. According to our best estimates, 86 percent of the sample had income from earnings and benefits under the poverty line; 12 percent were between 100 and 125 percent of poverty; and 2 percent were over 125 percent.

Definition of Poverty

Since interviews were conducted before official poverty data for 1986 became available, the poverty line was estimated by adjusting the 1985 figure upward by 1.5 percent for inflation. When the Census Bureau released its figures in August 1987, the actual adjustment was 1.9 percent. Thus, the percent of the sample beneath the poverty line are slightly underestimated in the study.

The official poverty threshold in 1986 was $5,572 for an individual, $7,138 for a family of two, $8,737 for a family of three, $11,203 for a family of four, and $13,259 for a family of five. The definition of poverty, developed in the 1950's, is based on the Department of Agriculture's estimated cost of a "Thrifty Food Plan" multiplied by three. It, thus, assumes that a family needs to spend twice the cost of the lowest cost nutritionally adequate diet on other necessities. If its cash income is under this level, the family is officially defined as "poor."

CHAPTER THREE

Overview Of Findings

The Poor and the Solutions They See To Poverty

Two findings of the survey might surprise even some who have studied the statistics and think they know who the poor are. One is the exceptionally high incidence of illness and disability. The other is the high degree of work effort. The numbers in both areas were greater than would have been predicted from either the sample design or statistical analyses of the poverty population.

The working poor were defined as interviewees in whose families at least one adult was working at the time of the interview. Fifty-five percent of the sample met this criteria. Since the sample quota of working poor was only 30 percent, the fact that more poor people turned out to be working testifies to the strong work ethic among the poor and, at the same time, the failure of many jobs to bring people out of poverty. Most of the working group were mothers of children. They were equally distributed among the four sites. And the proportion of those working was about the same for whites, blacks and Hispanics.

Yet, their annual income (what the family earned in the previous year) left them beneath the official poverty line of $8,737 for a family of three. Eighty percent of the working families in the sample lived beneath the poverty line and the rest were only slightly above. In the entire sample, all but a handful of those over age 18 had worked at some time in their lives even if they are not now working.

Thirty-six percent of the sample said they lived in families in which at least one person was "disabled, impaired or seriously ill." This was nearly four times the number who were purposely selected to be interviewed as representing the "disabled poor." It is about twice as high as usual estimates of the incidence of disability among the poor who live outside the institutions. And it is nearly four times the estimates of the incidence of disability in the general population.

The question arises as to whether poverty causes illness and disability or the other way around. The poor, of course, often have inadequate diets and tend to have less access to health care. They are more likely to have hazardous jobs and live in unsafe environments. At the same time, physical limitations or the need to care for a disabled family member makes it more difficult to earn a living which covers medication, supplies and other added expenses associated with serious illness.

More AFDC recipients than working poor in the sample had serious illness or disability in the family. The great majority of the sample who were disabled or had a disabled family member said they can't work or are limited in the jobs they can do or hours they can work. Most were women, often caring for husbands injured on the job or children suffering from asthma and other conditions needing constant attention. Nevertheless, the desire to work was often strong.

The incidence of illness and disability was twice as high for the elderly over age 60 than for the sample as a whole. No racial or ethnic group was immune from the higher than normal rate of disability and illness.

Degree Of Poverty Varies By Income Source

The interviews offered many examples of how people living beneath the poverty line make rational choices to survive and to improve their family's circumstances. One of them is the decision to work. Most of those interviewed did work outside the home even though their earnings made them only marginally better off than those receiving public assistance.

Families where AFDC and food stamps are the primary sources of income were the "poorest of the poor" in the study. Nearly a third of them, compared to 21 percent of the overall sample, had incomes less than 50 percent of the poverty line.

Perhaps because of the national minimum SSI benefit level, families in the study who had a disabled member were somewhat better off than AFDC recipients. But both groups had lower incomes than those who were working.

The following chart shows the income distribution in relation to the poverty line for the sample as a whole and three categories of respondents. The categories are not mutually exclusive. A number of AFDC recipients, for example, had disabilities and some of them worked at least some time in the previous year. The chart illustrates that for those interviewed welfare is not a better alternative than going to work. At the same time, working is usually not sufficient to escape poverty.

Percent Of Respondents In Relation To The Poverty Line

% of Poverty Line	Total Sample	Working	Disabled	AFDC
0–25	3	3	1	0
26–50	18	13	21	30
51–75	39	31	44	46
76–100	24	33	27	20
101–125	12	15	6	2
125 +	3	5	0	2

Of the four sites, Texas was markedly the poorest. Forty percent of those interviewed in Texas had family incomes equal to less than 50 percent of the poverty line. Only about 14 percent were that poor in each of the other locations. Both wages and benefit levels are low in Texas. Family size generally was larger in the Texas sample, which means it takes more income to bring the family above the poverty line. The state does not permit two-parent families to receive AFDC. Therefore, there were cases where a mother, unemployed father and children had absolutely no income from any source. In these instances, the families lived totally from the help they could get from the parents' parents who themselves were poor.

In all locations, the distribution of women and blacks relative to the poverty line was identical to that of the total sample. But Hispanics were somewhat poorer, and whites slightly better off. Twenty-one percent of the women and blacks interviewed had incomes less than 50 percent of the poverty line. Thirty-two percent of Hispanics, but only 10 percent of whites, had incomes in that lowest range.

The interviews detected some resentment by the working poor of those who were not working but got public assistance. Only a few, however, suggested that welfare benefits be curtailed or that the others be forced to go to work. Mostly, those working thought that government should help them too since they were trying so hard to support themselves.

A Moral Responsibility To Solve Poverty

The great majority (82 percent) of poor people interviewed said they agree with the statement that "government has a responsibility to help people get out of poverty." They cited many reasons, most prompted by moral and humanitarian beliefs. Since only about half of the sample identified themselves as "poor" when asked, the answers to this question probably related more to their own compassion for others in poverty than a plea for something for themselves. A few said they thought those in power have little understanding of the lives of poor people and that, if they did, they would try to help more.

The belief that poor people "pay into society" and, therefore, should be able to expect help when they're down was the other major assumption underlying the belief that government was obliged to alleviate poverty. Respondents offered this rationale almost as frequently as the humanitarian one. Like everyone, poor people pay taxes and should be able to get help when their circumstances change and they need it most. Poor people do pay taxes, respondents reasoned—not just income and payroll taxes when they're bringing home a paycheck, but, every time they buy something in a store and pay sales taxes. The cost of helping people get back on their feet when they're down is small compared to what poor people pay, or could pay, into society over a lifetime, explained one young man.

"I think it's a joint responsibility between the government and the people to help each other," one respondent said. "Government policies created poverty, so they should fix it," said another. "They can't just let people fend for themselves; they can't do it alone because things are beyond your control."

Of the 18 percent who said they thought government did not have a responsibility for reducing poverty, all but one person gave explanations based on the belief that it is up to individuals to take care of themselves. In answers to other questions too, the idea that "I have to do it myself" came up again and again. Young men living in poor families especially seemed to have confidence that they should be able to make it on their own.

Only one person in the entire sample said it was impossible for government to help. Almost everyone, in fact, had at one time or another been involved in some sort of anti-poverty program and found it to be helpful. Food stamps and Medicaid were deemed the most helpful by most people.

The Importance Of Jobs In The Overall Solution To Poverty

When asked what, if anything, the government should do about poverty, the largest number of respondents (40 percent) said that it should better manage the economy and make jobs available to everyone. In about the same proportions, women, blacks, Hispanics, the elderly and the working poor stressed jobs. As a group, AFDC recipients were more likely to call for jobs than the sample as a whole. To a lesser degree the disabled and young people under age 18 suggested job-related solutions to poverty.

The second largest category of answers, after jobs, related to government's responsibility to provide education and training. This was the most frequent response in Washington where the unemployment rate is fairly low and skill level requirements are constantly rising for the jobs available. Those questioned most frequently mentioned education and training when questioned later about personal rather than general societal needs.

Responses involving government's management of the economy were associated with the availability of jobs rather than such factors as inflation or interest rates. In Aliquippa, Pa., for example, respondents criticized government tax policy which assisted profitable companies to declare bankruptcy and move jobs to other parts of the country or overseas. In San Antonio, Spanish-American citizens were critical of policies which allowed employers to hire undocumented Mexicans who would work for pay below the minimum wage while they themselves could not find work that would support their families.

Unlike interviewees in Washington and San Antonio, in Aliquippa and rural North Carolina people talked about the need for investment and job creation. "Help the region," the former steelworkers and their neighbors said. Because the town, 45 minutes outside of Pittsburgh, has lost its economic base, even service sector jobs are hard to come by. Men who could be auto mechanics can't find cars to work on. While Texans mentioned competition from undocumented workers, single mothers in Aliquippa said they couldn't compete with teenagers for the night jobs in fast-food restaurants because they couldn't find child care.

"We need technology," they said in the isolated four-county area of North Carolina, so near and yet so far from the research triangle of Raleigh-Durham.

When asked what government should do to help people out of poverty, AFDC recipients also called most often for job-creating strategies, education, training and, only then, for increases in public benefits. Their answer to this general question about poverty was different from their responses to questions about the welfare system. When asked what improvements should be made, they most frequently said that benefit levels should be raised. The implication may be that recipients envision welfare as a residual, stop-gap program that barely provides enough to survive, and that, in their own experience, is incapable of providing the ultimate solution to poverty. Those *not* receiving welfare, however, were three times more likely than recipients to say that benefit levels should be increased in the government's overall efforts to alleviate poverty.

What Government Should Do To Help People Out Of Poverty

	Sample	Working	AFDC	Disabled
Jobs/Economy	41	39	45	29
Education/Training	25	22	26	30
Raise Benefits	12	11	4	10
Child care/other services	4	6	4	5
Housing	3	1	1	1
Other	15	20	21	25

Some answers couldn't be categorized with others. One single mother, for example, suggested establishment of housing developments for single mothers which would have on-site facilities for job training, child care and dealing with welfare bureaucracy requirements.

While several said government should do more to help the working poor, several others said assistance should be restricted in some way to those who actually need it. A few also mentioned outreach ("go to every household") so that people would know how to get the help that is available.

At least one person each responded to the question of what government should do to alleviate poverty by pointing to the need for higher wages, neighborhood safety or better housing conditions. One mentioned a range of basic needs: "Help people get jobs, food, clothing and shelter." And some appealed for a change in attitudes: "The government should be more aware of poor people and how they live."

That so many replies across the board related to the desire for a healthy economy and available jobs indicates that those at the bottom of the income ladder—even those who cannot go out and work—may suffer as much as, or even more than, their neighbors when the local economy collapses. As interviewees pointed out in Aliquippa, the local tax base suffers, people move away, services (like the bus system) are shut down, the crime rate goes up, racial tensions surface, and social support systems are overwhelmed.

Qualifying The "Jobs" Solution

How can jobs be seen as a major solution to poverty when relatively few—only 14 percent—said they weren't working because jobs weren't available? And why would those already working cite job creation in such great proportions when asked what government should do to reduce poverty?

A partial answer might be that this particular question related to poverty in general and not to the person's own situation. As will be discussed later, education and training are what respondents said they need most to improve their own circumstances.

A more complete answer can be found in the kinds of jobs people actually did have and why the others were not working.

In the families where no adult was working, the most frequently stated reasons were poor health or the unavailability of alternative child care.

About half the sample (including many who already had jobs) was in the job market, looking for jobs or new jobs.

The jobs held by the 55 percent of the sample that was working tend to be insecure and insufficient in terms of pay and benefits to overcome the poor's disproportionate number of health problems and disproportionate cost of obtaining health care and child care. Presumably, these are the same types of jobs that those who are not working would be able to obtain.

Virtually all of the jobs held by respondents were low-skill, part-time and low-paying. Of those working at the time of the interview, about half had full-time jobs and half worked less than 30 hours per week. Nearly half the jobs were seasonal or temporary. Typical were jobs as hotel maids, social service homemakers, construction laborers, janitors, mailing house workers, food processors, school bus drivers, fast-food cashiers, cooks, dishwashers, school safety guards. One in four of these working poor held second or third jobs.

Interviewers asked everyone if they had been employed previously. Ninety percent of adults had been employed at one time. Jobs they currently held were more highly concentrated in the service sector than jobs they had held. Sixty-three percent of the present jobs were in service categories compared to 47 percent of former jobs.

Influenced at least partly by the intentional selection of ex-steelworkers to interview, blue collar employment was lower than in the past for those in the sample. But so was white collar and farm employment. Most current blue collar jobs in the sample were in small food processing, sewing and small manufacturing plants (in North Carolina) and in construction (in San Antonio).

When asked what they would most like to change about their current jobs, 40 percent said they would like higher pay and 23 percent said more hours.

Whether working full-time or part-time, hourly wages usually exceeded the federal minimum wage of $3.35 an hour, yet left people below the poverty line. Those working less than 40 hours a week averaged $4.50. The average for full-time workers was $5 an hour, or $10,452 annually if the person worked all year.

The majority, however worked less than full-time, year-round. Only four out of 110 working people made more than $6.25 an hour, or $13,000 on a full-time, year round-basis. Only one-third of those working had medical coverage, which often was limited. One man noted that his policy covered only himself and none of the other members of his family.

Low Income Women's Views On Work

Women in the survey were especially dissatisfied with the kinds of jobs they had. In nearly the same proportions as the overall sample, higher pay was most frequently mentioned as the thing they would like to change about their current jobs. But women were more likely than the rest of the sample to want more hours, more benefits, better working conditions, greater opportunity for advancement and less stress from their jobs. Those in service jobs were especially likely to want more hours and an opportunity to advance. (Men in such jobs had similar opinions.)

A hotel maid in Washington, D.C., told of a housekeeping supervisor's position which she would have liked to have when it opened up. The company hired a male right out of college instead of offering her a promotion. She said she thought that after years of experience she understood the work and the hotel business better than he did, but the management wouldn't even consider her for the job.

Another Washington woman talked about the desire to have a job where she would learn something that would help her get a better job. "I don't need to be trained to flip burgers," she said. She already knew plenty about cooking hamburgers; she wanted a job that would give her skills that could lead to something else.

The study found several examples of elderly women who worked at low-paying jobs under severe hardship. One 69-year-old woman in Washington, D.C., who receives Social Security survivor's benefits of $148 a month, has had multiple health problems, including a broken hip which left one leg two inches shorter than the other. Still, after a bus route change, she walks several additional blocks to work at a part-time job that brings her income up to 91 percent of the poverty line.

This story and others like it highlighted the plight of women who have not worked during much of their younger lives or had jobs that bring little if any Social Security. Some, who have received AFDC while raising their children, are now facing the prospect of living another ten to twenty years with no income.

Getting a job will be difficult if they have no recent job experience, and they will not be able to qualify for SSI until they reach the age of 65 unless they can prove they are disabled. More than a fourth of the women who had received AFDC for more than two years said they were disabled. A few had tried and failed, because of insufficient evidence of disability, to qualify for SSI.

Over a third of the women who were not working lived with a husband or another adult member of the family who was employed. Most of the others who weren't working said it was because of personal health problems or the lack of child care. Of the latter group, those who said they needed child care assistance outnumbered those who wanted to care for their own children by three to one.

A young mother in San Antonio had four children under school age. During the interview with her, her mother interjected that she thought it would be irresponsible for her daughter to leave her children to go to work, although that is what she said she wanted to do.

A number of women receiving AFDC and, as a result, Medicaid, said it would be impossible for them to give up the health care for their children by going to work. One Washington woman, who before her children were born worked as a waitress in a drug store, has two young children with asthma and allergies who need special diets and constant attention in case they develop breathing problems. Going back to work would endanger the life of her infant unless she could get medical coverage that included outpatient treatment and drugs.

Job Related Injuries And Stress

A number of low income people interviewed pointed to working conditions when asked what they would change about their current jobs.

Instead of pay, hours or the many other things mentioned by the rest of the sample, the majority of Hispanics said the thing they would most like to change about their current job is the working conditions. Many of them have been employed as construction and field laborers in Texas and, as a result, have experienced job-related injuries, especially back injuries.

But Hispanics were not alone in wanting better working conditions. The few disabled persons who were working were more likely than the rest to say they would like to have more satisfaction from their jobs and less stress.

One man from Washington who worked in a rock quarry said he thought hazardous jobs should be required to pay higher wages than ordinary jobs.

A young woman, who prefers working in construction, may have to giver up her $5.50 an hour wage because "the work is just too hard for me." She had recently injured her arm cutting thick electrical cable and her abdominal muscles lifting heavy equipment. Since she has a daughter just entering school, she is also worried about the overtime work most contractors expect of their employees.

Why Poor People Don't Have Good Jobs

Poor people interviewed are not strangers to the labor force, but many factors limit their ability to work or get jobs that meet their needs.

Although nearly half in the sample have been unemployed for two years or more, nine in ten of those over age 18 had worked at some time in their lives. The interviews attempted to learn why people lost their last jobs and, more generally, what they thought was the principal reason for their present unemployment or under-employment.

When asked why they left their last jobs, most said they were fired or laid-off, indicating the fluidity, or lack of security, in the secondary labor market. If the laid off steelworkers are discounted, the major reasons people left jobs were health problems, accidents, and the need to care for children or dependents. Many times women were fired because they became pregnant. Sometimes they quit because juggling the demands of home and work became too great.

This was the case of one woman in Washington who thought she was late or absent from work too many times after her husband became hospitalized. She resigned her janitorial job out of good conscience, but the family was soon evicted for inability to pay rent. After months of living with friends and relatives, she and her children found themselves living in a welfare hotel which made it even more difficult for her to get on her feet again. The rules of the hotel required her to check out every morning, taking her children and all her belongings with her as she looked for a job and another place to live.

Discrimination in employment was prevalent. When asked if they had "ever been affected by discrimination," 43 percent of the sample said they had. The majority of them described situations where they thought their race, sex, ethnicity or age had prevented them from getting a job or a promotion or had relegated them to a lower pay scale. White males nearing retirement age in Pennsylvania felt that employers preferred to hire younger people. In San Antonio, Mexican-Americans felt that employers hired undocumented foreigners for jobs that they could do just as well or better. They also said they were laid off before their Anglo co-workers who had less experience and seniority. In North Carolina, black women told of having been passed over for promotions because of their race, of having trained the people who got to move up.

Of those who are not now looking for work the largest number (about 40 percent) have another adult member of the family, usually a spouse, who is working. Although their family income is beneath the poverty line, a few of them have accepted their economic situation. One such woman in North Carolina is trained as a nurse and could go back to work. Since her husband is working, she says she would rather make economic sacrifices to be home with her children.

Non-economic Factors Keep Many From Good Jobs

Everyone was asked the *main* reason for their unemployment or underemployment, being unable to get a job that was "good enough."

Poor health was the most frequent explanation. Those over age 60 and disabled persons, naturally, were the most likely to cite health reasons. Blacks and Hispanics were more likely than the sample as a whole to say that health problems also kept them from having the jobs they wanted or any jobs at all. Hispanic men in Texas, with little education or ability to read, write or speak English, seem to have an unusual incidence of back injuries. As a result, they can neither continue doing manual labor nor make the transition to office work or another field which requires basic levels of literacy in English.

Women, including AFDC recipients, most frequently said they were unemployed or under-employed because they were caring for children or other dependents. In Texas, especially, both men and women thought it was important for mothers to be home with their children until they became school age. They conveyed the belief that a mother can better teach her children and advance their chance to make it in life if they stay home with them in the early years. In San Antonio barrios and the Washington inner city, poor women are afraid to leave their children unattended because of dangers in their neighborhoods. Several persons mentioned the fear of their children coming into contact with known child abusers.

One-third of service workers said the main reason for their *under*-employment is the need to care for children. While requiring sacrifices in pay and benefits, service jobs sometimes are more flexible and adaptable to the need of mothers to be with their children at certain times of the day. Being a waitress at night, for example, can enable a woman to leave her children in the care of another member of the family who is gone during the day. A school bus driver said she prefers that job to others that do not match her children's schedules.

Hispanics, more than any other group in the sample, said they lacked experience or the proper credentials to get good jobs. They are most often referring to the lack of a high school diploma. Many felt they could not read and write well enough to participate in training programs.

Main Reason For Not Having A Job Or Good Enough Job
(Percent)

	Sample	Working	AFDC	Disabled	Women
Poor health	21	16	18	44	19
Caring for children/ dependents	20	22	34	6	34
No jobs/ economic conditions	20	23	6	8	8
Need training/ education	14	15	16	10	18
Laid off/fired	7	5	6	8	3
Jobs don't pay enough/carry benefits	9	6	10	6	6
Lack experience/ credential	6	10	5	8	8
Discrimination	3	3	2	0	3
Other	0	0	3	10	1

Although only a few said the *main* reason for their unemployment or under-employment was discrimination, as mentioned earlier, nearly half of the entire sample had been affected by discrimination, most frequently in employment.

For working people, the question was one of why the jobs they had were not "good enough." Among those working in the service sector, for example, 27 percent gave answers that were categorized as "no jobs/economic conditions."

Greatest Need: Education And Training

When the question turned from the reason for unemployment or under-employment to what interviewees need to achieve the kind of job or income they need, people were more likely to point to their own skill deficiencies rather than external circumstances.

Training and education were overwhelmingly the most frequent answer when the question was "what would help you get the kind of job or income that you need." Fifty-two percent mentioned either training, education or both, and another six percent specified that they needed a college education. This was true in every location and among every category of respondents regardless of age, sex, race or ethnicity.

AFDC recipients were the most likely to say they needed education and training. Women who were on AFDC and unemployed for more than two years said education, training and college 78 percent of the time. One such person in Pennsylvania said:

> "When a person has been successful at even the first step in educating themselves, the whole welfare system should be designed to allow that person to continue their education. Other than that, the only way you can get people off welfare is to create decent jobs that fit the skills of the people."

Young people between the ages of 18 and 24 mentioned education and training 67 percent of the time. They were slightly more likely than other groups to cite the need for college (8 percent). One young black man in Washington said he needs something to distinguish himself from the hundreds of other applicants for jobs he applies for. Getting his GED was crucial to him, but he thinks he still needs to "know someone" in order to have his application rise to the surface and overcome his lack of experience.

People who already have a job also said they need education and training more than anything else if they are to achieve the income level or job they need.

More than others in the sample, disabled and elderly people said they most needed references and contacts to get the kind of jobs they need. This speaks to their relative isolation from the mainstream job market and the way most people get jobs. Nevertheless, most of the elderly were not really looking for a job. And disabled persons, like the others, most frequently mentioned education and training as the thing they most need.

Hispanics, most of them women, also were more likely than others to say they needed references and contacts. And, even more than AFDC recipients, they said they needed child care assistance if they were to enter the paid labor market.

Necessary To Get The Kind Of Job/Income Needed
(Percent)

	Sample	Working	Disabled	AFDC
Training/education	52	54	44	64
College	6	8	4	4
Economic changes	15	10	11	2
References/contacts	9	7	15	4
Child care	6	6	6	13
Capital to start own business	5	1	0	2
Transportation	2	5	4	2
Other	5	9	16	9

The need for education and training among poor people was one of the strongest findings of the survey. Without it, many know they will continue to be relegated to jobs that will keep them and their children poor.

Poverty Itself A Reason For Leaving School

If people who are poor realize that an education (and training) is the thing they need most to get the kind of job and income they need, why do they drop out of high school at rates 1 1/2 times the general population?

When asked what would have helped them stay in school, the largest number in the survey sample gave answers relating to the need for more financial resources. Usually, this was stated in terms of having to go to work to help support their families. The second greatest reason for leaving school before graduating was related to getting married or pregnant.

Yet having children usually worsened economic circumstances. About half of the men and women in the sample who were parents had their first child at age 19 or younger. A third of them said their financial situation got better—usually because they were forced to go to work. The other two-thirds said their situation got worse because they had more expenses or had to work harder, often with no child care. A few said they lost the opportunity to advance their education or career. AFDC recipients, more often than not, worked for a while after having their first child and only later turned to public assistance.

As might be expected, reasons for leaving school varied considerably according to race, sex, and age. Men hardly ever said they left school because of marriage or having children. However, those who said they left school to go to work often did so because of the birth of their first child or marriage. Women, on the other hand, attributed leaving school directly to marriage or having children. Respondents over age 61 were much more likely to have left for financial reasons than the youngest age group. And minority groups, far more than whites, cited financial reasons for having to leave school.

Reasons For Dropping Out Of School
(Percent)

		Age		Sex		Race/Ethnicity		
	Sample	16–18	Over 61	Women	Men	Black	Hisp.	White
Finances	25	8	43	18	37	30	32	15
Married/Pregnant	18	19	7	27	5	19	19	18
Home Problem	16	8	14	20	11	23	11	15
Lack of Interest	15	19	7	14	0	14	14	6
Teachers/School	7	23	7	6	9	2	11	9
Got Behind	6	4	4	6	9	5	6	0
Peer Influence	2	4	0	1	2	2	0	3
Other	11	15	12	8	27	5	7	44

Across the sample, home-related problems were often given as reasons for leaving school. Often they involved alcohol or substance abuse by a parent. In other instances, they were things associated with poverty such as over-crowded housing or experiencing the ridicule of other children because of the clothing they had to wear. One boy in Washington said his classmates were revolted when roaches would crawl out of his lunch box.

Relatively few overall said they would have stayed in school if they had had better teachers or classes. But there was a strong generational difference in attitudes toward school itself. For those now over age 61, the quality of schooling was of little importance compared to the need to go to work to help support the family. Younger people much more frequently than the older generation gave reasons relating to school itself, including lack of interest, failing and getting behind, poor teachers or classes.

Answers categorized as "lack of interest" ranged from the relatively incommunicative—"I just quit," or "I didn't like school"—to those citing more appealing alternatives. Work in a steel mill or at the Post Office, joining the armed services or getting married were among the options that seemed better at the time. In their explanations, some respondents added, "I wasn't learning anything in school anyway." Most of these sorts of answers were given by young adults. They gave the distinct impression that they realized too late that an education was important to earn a living. As one woman who dropped out because of marriage said:

> "I didn't think about it. I should've stayed in school. Everybody needs a high school diploma to get a job. I know more now than I did when I first got married."

College Not Even On The Horizon

The questionnaire did not ask any questions pertaining specifically to higher education, but six percent of the sample specifically cited college as what they needed most to raise their income or get the kind of job they wanted to have. Interviewees under the age of 25 were only slightly more likely than the others to specify college as a means for them to get ahead.

The 12 percent of the sample who had had any years of education beyond high school was close to the national average of 15 percent for the poverty population who have some college. Among all income groups nationally, 33 percent of adults have at least some college.

The relatively low six percent who specified the need for a college education indicates that, for some reason, the message is not being communicated to poor people that college can help them improve their economic status. If most drop out of high school for financial reasons, they probably can't even begin to think about going to college. Yet, a study recently published by the Congressional Joint Economic Committee concluded that 24 percent of the top third of jobs in terms of earnings go those with at least some college. In contrast, those with only a high school diploma get only ten percent of the best jobs.

Training Not Linked To Jobs

Most respondents said training and education were what they needed to get the kind of job or income they need, and they retained faith in that even when their past experience with training programs had not been positive.

AFDC recipients, blacks and the working poor had received training in greater proportions than the total sample. (Less than half of youth and Hispanics had.) Although about half of those interviewed had already been in training programs, most of them said it did not help them get a job.

Those who had been involved in training programs said the best thing about them was that they taught job skills. It would have been more helpful, they said, if those skills had been linked to jobs available in the community. It would also have been helpful to have a higher level of skill training, better instructors and counselors and more hands-on training with modern equipment.

Only eight percent said the most helpful thing about the training programs had been the development of basic reading, writing and math skills. The desire for educational improvement, therefore, seems to be unmet in current job training programs.

Summary

Low income people who can work would rather work. Nearly half of those surveyed, however, said that poor health or the lack of child care keeps them from working. Although they recommended increasing welfare benefits, few think of this as the ultimate solution to poverty. Government could help by making sure that jobs are available, especially in isolated areas adversely affected by the economy.

Poor people say the jobs available to them need to pay more or allow them to work more hours. Employment is often tenuous. Those interviewed were subject to frequent lay-offs. Accidents, illness and the disruption of child care arrangements often cause them to have to leave jobs. Those interviewed said that they experienced discrimination on the basis of age, race and sex, especially in promotions and pay. Some were passed over for better jobs because they lacked a credential that they did not believe was necessary to hold the position.

By the time they reach young adulthood, most respondents realized that they needed more education to get the kind of job and the income they need to support their families. Many of them dropped out before graduating from high school for economic reasons, usually to support their family or their first child. Older people most often cited the necessity to work at a young age as the major factor for leaving school. Now, those who are of working age say that government could best help them by providing education and training. Most training programs they have experienced, however, did not lead to jobs.

Overall, low income people believe government has a responsibility to help people out of poverty. If not for moral and humanitarian reasons, they think that they deserve assistance because they have contributed to society by paying taxes like everyone else.

CHAPTER FOUR

Current Anti-Poverty Programs: How Poor People Would Change Them

Since enactment of the Social Security Act in 1935, the United States has had programs designed to curb, if not eliminate, poverty. Some, like Social Security and unemployment insurance, are not restricted to those who are poor but help all who have "paid into" them. They also help keep many from entering the ranks of the poor.

Other programs, like AFDC and food stamps, supplement or provide the sole income of many but certainly not all poor people. Except in rare circumstances, they are insufficient in and of themselves to lift anyone out of poverty. Still another set of programs, most of which started during the War on Poverty, provide a range of services—among them, education, health, training, social services and community development—intended to make poor people more capable of helping themselves out of poverty.

During the interviews, people were asked about this full range of federally funded programs—whether they had participated in them and, if so, what was "best" and "worst" about each of them. They also were asked what would be the *first* thing they would do to change any of the programs if they could.

Virtually no government program exists that adopts the overall approach that poor people think is needed—making sure that "good" jobs are widely available. Not since the demise of public service employment under CETA in 1982, has the federal government attempted to create jobs directly. Macro-economic policies are sometimes designed explicitly to stimulate job creation, but, unless the unemployment rate is well below the recent norm, very few "good jobs" get to the poor.

If people are unable to get jobs, or good enough jobs; or if, they are unable to work, they usually find themselves relying on government assistance programs for at least part of their support. Much of this chapter is devoted to what poor people think about these programs.

Participation In Income Support Programs

Survey respondents had participated widely in 15 programs which provide cash or in-kind benefits in lieu of cash. However, none of the programs have reached all of the poor people interviewed. The most widely used program was food stamps. Eighty percent of the sample had at one time or another received food stamps. The programs used least frequently were Trade Readjustment Allowances and Social Security disability.

The chart below shows how many interviewees (including members of their families) have participated in each program. They were recorded as either participating at the time of the interview or in the past, but not both. The column marked total indicates the percentage of the entire sample which had ever participated—now or in the past—in each of the programs.

Participation In Benefit Programs
(Percent)

	Now	Past	Total
Aid to Families With Dependent Children	26	20	46
Food Stamps	57	23	80
Low Income Energy Assistance	33	12	45
General Assistance	9	7	16
Unemployment Insurance	5	27	32
Trade Adjustment Allowance	2	4	6
Social Security Retirement	8	1	9
Social Security Survivors' Benefits	7	3	10
Social Security Disability	4	2	6
Supplemental Security Income	8	1	8
Medicaid	45	15	60
College Grants/Loans	9	8	17
Veterans Benefits	5	2	8
Housing Assistance	25	5	30

Although 36 percent of the sample were either disabled themselves or had another family member who was seriously ill or disabled, relatively few had ever received either Social Security disability (6 percent) or Supplemental Security Income (8 percent), the two major programs of cash assistance for disabled persons. Several mentioned difficulties in "proving" sufficient disability in both programs.

Disabled single persons and those without children—people who cannot qualify for AFDC—must rely entirely upon non-federal general assistance programs while awaiting eligibility determinations for SSI and/or Social Security disability. This is also often the only means of support, except for food stamps, available to people when eligibility is denied. General assistance, however, is not available in all locations since it is state or locally financed. Of the four locations studied, two (Texas and North Carolina) have no general assistance program.

Social insurance programs, with the exception of unemployment compensation, had provided the highest level of support to those who had received them. Means-tested welfare programs provided the least amount of support. Those interviewed who had received Social Security retirement benefits had median monthly payments in the $350–$450 range. Those receiving veterans benefits, general assistance, Social Security disability and Social Security survivors' benefits got $250–$350. Those receiving food stamps, AFDC, SSI, housing assistance, unemployment insurance, low income energy assistance and trade re-adjustment were the worst off. The median monthly benefits amounted to less than $200 in each of these programs.

Relatively few of those interviewed received benefits from multiple programs other than the basic cash assistance, Medicaid and food stamps. For example, of the 53 interviewees whose families were currently participating in the AFDC and Medicaid programs, 89 percent also received food stamps; 47 percent, housing assistance; 36 percent Low Income Energy Assistance; 11 percent, college aid; 6 percent, Social Security survivors' benefits, Social Security disability and SSI; and no families simultaneously participated in Unemployment Insurance and Social Security retirement.

Services Received

Interviewees were asked about their and their families' participation in 21 service programs. Participation rates were lower in most of them than in the basic welfare programs. No one had used every one of the service programs available to them, but every one of the 21 programs had been used by at least someone.

The extensive use of private non-profit food distribution services like food banks and soup kitchens indicates that food stamps and cash assistance programs do not totally meet the most basic survival needs of many of those interviewed. In fact, nutrition programs generally were among the most highly rated of all programs.

By and large, interviewees found the services helpful. Only one or two had negative comments about any of the service programs. The exception was WIN (the program intended to help AFDC recipients find employment), where one-third of the persons who had been enrolled said it was not helpful. In these cases, they had not received the services they had desired or been promised. (A recent study by the U.S. General Accounting Office helps explain the source of this dissatisfaction. In the past five years, GAO reports, federal funding for WIN has declined 70 percent. Due partly to shrinking funds, state WIN programs have provided few of the intensive education, training and support services that many AFDC recipients need in order to join the paid labor force.)

Participation In Services
(Current and Past)

	Percent of Sample
Head Start	37
Remedial/Bi-lingual Education	8
Vocational Rehabilitation	9
Job Corps	8
Job Training	50
Summer Youth Employment	19
Public Service Employment	10
WIC (Supplemental Feeding for Women, Infants and Children)	45
Meals on Wheels	5
Free School Lunch	65
Food Bank	64
WIN	15
Mental Health	14
Day Care	14
Home Health	5
Legal Services	16
Counseling	15
Free Clinic	15
Community Development	6
Maternal Child Health	9
Sheltered Workshop	2

Most of these programs are funded by and originate at the federal level but are operated by local public and private agencies. Generally speaking, participation rates were much lower in North Carolina and somewhat higher in Washington, D.C. The highest participation rates in North Carolina were in school lunch and WIC.

Respondents were also asked if they had participated in any non-profit community organizations where they volunteered their services or participated in self-help activities. Over 80 percent said they had been involved in neighborhood organizations, Alcoholics Anonymous, church-related programs and other groups. They said they benefited from these programs in a number of ways, but mostly they felt the organizations had enabled them to help others. A number said that the activities led to their own self-development and, to a lesser extent, that the work indirectly helped get them a job.

The Need To Raise Benefits And Streamline The System

When asked the single most important thing they would do to change any of the existing programs, by far the largest number of people said that benefits should be increased. The second most frequent response related to the need to relax eligibility requirements. And the third, very closely associated with eligibility, was to streamline the bureaucracy and improve the attitude of caseworkers. Most of these responses concerned the AFDC program, but similar suggestions were made in regard to food stamps, unemployment compensation and other basic benefit programs.

Of the entire sample, 29 percent suggested raising benefits; 19 percent, loosening eligibility requirements; 15 percent, eliminating bureaucratic requirements; and 11 percent, improving the treatment they receive from eligibility workers. Women receiving AFDC were somewhat more likely than the overall sample to give these kinds of responses.

The working poor were more likely than other groups of respondents to say eligibility requirements should be loosened. "Help the working people who are trying to help themselves," several specifically said. In fact, most of those who had participated in various benefit programs in the past lost benefits when their earnings edged, even temporarily, over the eligibility ceilings.

There were some twenty other categories of responses to the question, "If you could change current government programs, what is the *first* thing you would do?" Ten percent answered that there was nothing they would change. And from one to five percent gave such answers as increasing housing assistance and health services, guaranteeing jobs, improving drug programs and developing more concern and generosity among public officials and the elite.

Gratitude For Minimum Subsistence

Despite recommendations for higher benefits and less strict eligibility rules, the interviews revealed a sense of gratitude for benefits which were often described as "not lasting the month." The inadequacy of benefits can probably explain the wide use of food banks among all types of respondents.

When asked to describe the "best, or most helpful, thing" about the various benefit programs, most gave answers like "it (food stamps) puts food on the table," "it provides the basic necessities," or "at least I don't have to beg or steal." Many said things like "I'm glad to have it," "I don't know what I'd do without it," or "I'm grateful for it."

Only seven out of the 154 respondents who had ever been enrolled in a public benefit program said that it hadn't helped them. In these few instances, the main reason was that the benefits were too low.

In ranking programs that were most helpful, the programs that most people had experience with (AFDC, Medicaid, and Food Stamps) were mentioned most frequently. More answered Social Security retirement and Medicaid when asked which they thought were most helpful to poor people in general than when asked what the most important program was to them personally.

Appreciation for the Medicaid program indicated some of the distinctive problems the poor face in obtaining health care. Besides saying they "couldn't get medical care without it," others pointed out that, although they rarely if ever have had to use it, it is like an insurance policy in the case of an unexpected health problem. Mothers were especially likely to note that Medicaid covers regular doctor's visits for their children unlike many private health policies which only cover hospitalization. Although some cited bureaucratic problems and insensitive treatment by doctors and other health care providers, they also noted that it was good that they didn't have to go through a separate application process for Medicaid once they qualified for AFDC or SSI.

When asked about food stamps, a number specifically mentioned that they help buy *nutritious food.* Nearly as many, however, when asked the "worst, or least helpful" thing about food stamps, said they wished the vouchers could be used to buy nonfood necessities like hygienic and household supplies. Still another group mentioned that, although they could only buy food, the rest of their budget was freed up to buy other necessities.

A Desire To "Pay Back"

The sense of gratitude for help received from the government led a substantial number—but not a majority—to say they would feel "good" about participating in a program where they would work off benefits received under AFDC, general assistance or food stamps. Fifteen percent of those who had received such benefits gave answers indicating that workfare would be like paying off a loan, the least they could do for getting help when they needed it. A similar number said it would help them feel more personally worthwhile.

The majority, however, cited a number of reasons why they would not like to participate in such a work program. Most (16 percent of all past and present recipients) said they would rather have a "regular job." Another 15 percent said they were physically unable, too old or too committed to caring for their families to go to work for their benefits. The others said they believed they were entitled to assistance with no strings, or that the benefit payments were just too low, or work-related costs too great, to make it financially worthwhile to participate in such a program. Among the work-related costs were child care and transportation.

Eighteen interviewees had already participated in a workfare program, but, when asked, none of them said it helped them to find a regular job. In fact, they said it made finding a job more difficult, because they gained no new skills and had little time to look for a regular job.

Almost 90 percent of past and present recipients said they would be more likely to want to participate in a welfare-employment program if it led to a guaranteed job, included job training, child care or similar services, help in finding a job, or health coverage. In the same proportions, they said they would be less likely to want to participate if they did not receive the equivalent of at least the minimum wage or regular fringe benefits and employee rights.

Problems With The Bureaucracy

Virtually no program was immune from complaints about the bureaucracy entailed in qualifying and maintaining eligibility for cash benefits. This was particularly true, however, in the AFDC and food stamp programs.

The amount of documentation required seemed excessive to many. It was common for people to describe having to make several trips to the welfare office and "all over town" to retrieve the necessary documentation—birth certificates, utility bills, bank records, pay stubs, titles to property, etc. Some had to set aside entire days to spend waiting to see a caseworker even though they had the requisite appointment. This process was repeated frequently because of the inevitable need to straighten out computer errors or other matters which result in sudden termination or reduction of benefits, usually without notice. Most recipients are required to report their earnings each month, and the slightest fluctuation can cause abrupt termination of benefits leading to the need to re-establish eligibility all over again.

Sometimes extra trips are required when emergency expenses occur. One AFDC recipient felt that few others knew of the availability of emergency funds that could be given out under special circumstances. Line workers do not give out such information and sometimes do not even tell people where they can get emergency food supplies. Several others could not understand why welfare offices do not even post information on job openings or other services that would be of help.

The attitude of welfare workers was described as rude and insulting by a number of recipients, but it was sometimes hard to distinguish the cause of such treatment. Is it the low level of pay, training or qualifications of eligibility workers or the demands they must make on people to comply with regulations, including those which require a reduction of "error rates" when they are in the recipient's favor? In North Carolina, there were relatively few complaints about welfare programs but indications that recipients were afraid to say anything negative since they had such a hard time getting benefits in the first place. In several cases in North Carolina, people said they thought they had been denied benefits or given a hard time because of racial attitudes.

Differences Between Medicare And Medicaid

Most of those interviewed expressed general satisfaction with the medical assistance they received. However, they were more negative about Medicaid (a means-tested program) than Medicare, which is an entitlement for persons over 65 and certain disabled persons. States have considerably more flexibility in structuring their Medicaid programs, including the ability to designate services which are covered, whether or not a recipient has a choice of doctors, and how much certain recipients must spend out-of-pocket before Medicaid takes over.

Although there was general satisfaction with the Medicaid program, about a fourth of those who had experience with it thought it should cover a wider range of services—dental, certain prescriptions, special dietary or equipment needs. In some cases, mothers' health care needs were not as well met as those of children.

A smaller number did not like the fact that they could not choose their own doctor or health care facility but were automatically assigned to certain providers. Several also said they thought providers exploit the program by over-charging or ordering too many tests and treatments, and some felt they were not treated with the same respect as other patients.

Of the 20 Medicare recipients, only nine could identify anything that was "worst, or least helpful" about it. They most often cited the out-of-pocket costs borne by the recipient and the lack of coverage for certain services.

Housing Assistance Rated Highly But Few Can Get In

When asked if they were "satisfied with their housing," one-fourth of the sample said they were not, usually because of its condition, especially such sub-standard conditions as the lack of plumbing. The condition of housing was more often a concern than its cost, location or size.

(A number answered that they were satisfied with their housing even though such dilapidating conditions as lack of plumbing were apparent to those conducting the interview. This led interviewers to wonder whether the question about housing was worded in a way that could truly capture a respondent's objective evaluation of his or her housing. Interviewers speculated that, when people are asked whether they are "satisfied" with such personal aspects of their lives as housing, or child care, they would be reluctant to say no for fear that it would indicate some personal deficiency or irresponsibility.)

For the majority who said they were satisfied, the reason was usually because their housing was affordable or they simply liked the house or apartment. Comments like "I'd be out on the street if I didn't live here" were common.

Subsidized housing, received by one-fourth of the sample, was one area in which the resentment of the working poor was especially strong. A number of them made a special point of questioning why they couldn't qualify for housing assistance when others in similar economic situations could. Indeed, interviewers observed in a few cases that those with somewhat higher incomes lived in the poorest housing. (Respondents were given an option of being interviewed at home or in an office.) Waiting lists for public or assisted housing were more frequent and longer in this program than in any other. About half of those who had been on the lists waited for them three to five years before they got help.

Summary

Respondents use a wide range of cash assistance, public service and social insurance programs, but none of them fully meet the needs of all. Generally, people are grateful for subsistence level benefits and feel a sense of debt to society. Benefits and services are almost unanimously rated as helpful in some way, but interviewees thought the programs should provide more help with less bureaucracy.

What Is The First Thing You Would Do To Change Programs?
Most Frequent Responses

	Percent of Total
Higher Benefits	23
Reduce bureaucracy	9
More courteous workers	5
All three of the above	6
Loosen eligibility	13
Guarantee jobs to all	5
More health services	4
Make training more effective	4
More/better housing	3
Eliminate stigma	3
Other	25

More respondents take advantage of food programs—from food stamps to free school lunches and special food supplements for pregnant women and children, than any other kind of program. Many who do not qualify for other forms of assistance can at least get this assistance or help from free distribution centers.

Few of the respondents qualified for social insurance programs which pay higher benefits than means-tested welfare programs. Those who did receive various forms of Social Security had fewer negative comments about them compared to recipients of other aid. There were very few complaints about Medicare, for example. Medicaid, the health program for the poor, however, could be improved by providing a fuller range of services, a number of interviewees said.

Although housing was not a major focus of the interviews, the lack of it emerged as a serious need. The working poor, especially, thought they were unfairly denied access to housing assistance.

When asked how they would change government programs, low income people in the study focused primarily on welfare programs such as AFDC and food stamps. They said benefits should be higher, eligibility rules more supportive of the working poor and the delivery system more efficient and courteous.

The American social welfare system has been criticized as a morass of duplicative programs which poor people can use to accumulate benefits and services beyond the reach of the average citizen. However, the survey found relatively low participation rates in the various programs and benefit levels that, even when combined, left most respondents substantially beneath the poverty line. The extensive use of various private emergency food programs indicates that food stamps and other cash assistance programs do not fully meet the most basic survival needs. The picture that poor people paint of the social welfare system is one in which they must piece together assistance from a variety of public and private sources in order to achieve a minimal standard of living for their families.

CHAPTER FIVE

An Isolated Pocket of Poverty Northeastern North Carolina

by Deborah Freedman

ortheastern North Carolina consists of small communities in the rural tradition. Many families have lived in the area for several generations. Churches provide the focus for most social and cultural activities, and people feel strong ties to family and community. In the past, most residents of the northeast lived and worked on small to moderate sized farms. Sharecropping, too, was very common.

Hertford, Gates, Bertie and Northampton counties are part of the North Carolina's coastal plains, located near the "outer banks." The spectacular beaches and resorts along the coast are popular vacation spots which bring large numbers of tourists to the area in summer months. Two hours to the west is the prosperous research triangle, defined by the cities of Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill, which has gained the state a national reputation for leadership in high-tech research and development.

Although situated between two economically flourishing regions, the northeast remains isolated and has not benefited from their prosperity. Employment in either area requires long daily commutes. Jobs in the tourist industry tend to be seasonal and low paying. Highly skilled technical jobs in "triangle east" often go to company employees from out of state, leaving only low wage service jobs for the few residents of the Northeastern part of the state who commute there. The population of the four northeastern counties studied relate more to employment centered around Norfolk and Virginia Beach, still a long daily commute.

Historically, the northeast has been a very poor region, and that situation remains unchanged today. Much of the housing is substandard; many people live without indoor plumbing, and some without electricity as well. About 25 percent of the population in the region lives below the poverty line, compared to 17.5 percent statewide and 14.4 percent nationally. Median family income in the counties studied is $13,502, compared with a national median of $19,917. Northeastern North Carolina remains poor for a variety of reasons.

North Carolina is a state in transition. Once a farm state, in recent years it has been successful in attracting new industry. Unfortunately, little of this industry has located in the northeast. The economy was traditionally based primarily on small and moderate sized manufacturing, such as textile and poultry processing, which are tied closely to agriculture. In recent years family farming has become less profitable, and no influx of new industry has counterbalanced the loss.

Industry has been hesitant to enter the northeast for a number of reasons, but two factors are especially noteworthy according to community leaders who assisted in the survey. One, common to many smaller communities, is lack of infrastructure. Like other rural areas, the northeast has fewer and less specialized educational facilities, hospitals, highways, and other services to offer potential residents. Because the community is small and poor, and wages are low, it is also difficult to attract skilled professionals to the area.

A second consideration inhibiting investment is the current impoverishment of the region. Because few jobs are available, the region is losing population. While North Carolina's population grew 15 percent between 1970 and 1980, the population of the four-county area shrank. Younger people are particularly likely to leave the northeast and seek jobs in other parts of the country. Perhaps most importantly, only 40.5 percent of adults who have remained in the northeast have finished high school, compared to 54.8 percent statewide, and 66.5 percent nationally. Because of low educational levels and the loss of younger, trainable people, industrialists fear that if they move to the northeast they will not be able to hire skilled local workers.

Whatever the reasons, recent sustained efforts to attract industry have failed. A region that could benefit most from economic development is unable to get the help it needs due to the very fact that it is needy. Officials have decided that the best strategy for economic development is to further cultivate the small manufacturing that exists in the region and to attract more business through tourism. Unfortunately, jobs with small businesses and the tourist industry tend to be low-paying and often fail to provide health insurance or other benefits crucial for employees.

As younger, able-bodied people have left the region, the proportion of those who are dependent on some form of public assistance has grown. They are the least mobile. The percent of the population which is elderly, disabled, or living in large families is rising. Many of these residents are poor and unable to work. Those who can't work must rely on government programs for their subsistence and are vulnerable to budget cuts, changes in eligibility or accounting in these programs.

Poverty in the northeast is concentrated in the black community. One in every four black families in the area lives beneath the official poverty line, while only 5 percent of whites are impoverished. The unemployment rate for blacks is more than twice the rate for whites, and mean income for blacks is substantially lower than average income for white residents. Whites hold over 70 percent of the managerial positions in Hertford county, while blacks fill 60 percent of positions known as "nonsupervisory farm, handlers, helpers, and laborers."

Sample Design And Demographics

Northeastern North Carolina was chosen as a site in which to study the special problems associated with rural and southern poverty. The economic problems facing the region are typical of difficulties encountered by rural areas elsewhere in the country. And, as in much of the South, this rural area has a majority black population.

Residents of non-metropolitan localities currently comprise 30 percent of the poor population, and 38 percent of the nation's poor live in the South. Lack of infrastructure, population loss, and low levels of participation in government programs are all common problems for rural communities. The Coalition's interest was in discovering whether or not the rural poor have ideas and needs that are different from those found in urban populations included in the study. Another goal in North Carolina was to study the working poor since rural poverty is often associated with a lack of job opportunities in rural areas dominated by farming.

Increasing numbers of working people are living below the poverty line in all parts of the country. According to a recent report by the National League of Cities, the number of workers age 22–64 who live in poverty increased by 60 percent between 1978 and 1984. This too is typical of rural communities where low-wage, and part-time or seasonal employment is prevalent.

The Coalition interviewed 48 residents of Hertford, Bertie, Northampton, and Gates counties. Most people had incomes that put them between 50 and 100 percent of the poverty line.

The sample was 67 percent black and 33 percent white. Of those interviewed, 70 percent were female and 30 percent were male. The sample included respondents of all ages. Thirteen people interviewed were under age 25; 29 were between the ages of 25 and 60; and seven were age 61 and above. All but three respondents were born in North Carolina.

Basic Welfare Programs

Like other southern and border states, North Carolina welfare programs have relatively strict eligibility rules and low benefit payments. The state also requires a high degree of financial participation from the counties and vests more control in local governing boards. Areas poor in resources and dominated by a predominantly white power structure have been reluctant to institute many social programs.

North Carolina has no general assistance program to assist the poor and disabled who do not qualify for AFDC or SSI. It has rejected the option of providing emergency assistance under AFDC for families with children threatened with destitution or homelessness due to emergency situations such as natural disasters. Similarly, there is no such program for migrant workers, although many are employed in the state. North Carolina is also among the twenty-six states which do not cover two-parent families under AFDC.

North Carolina requires counties to pay part of the state contribution to AFDC benefits, as do nine other states. Localities in North Carolina must pay a higher percentage (50 percent) than anywhere in the nation except New York State. North Carolina is also one of 23 states in which AFDC is governed by a local board which appoints the administrator. Finally, North Carolina is one of only four states in which eligibility hearings are held at the local, rather than state level.

In 1985, North Carolina ranked 44th in the country in monthly AFDC payments to a mother and two children. The maximum benefit from AFDC in 1987 provides a family of three with $259 a month. When combined with federally financed food stamps of $210, income for such a family comes to only 64 percent of the poverty line. Since 1970, the maximum AFDC benefit in the state has dropped 37 percent in constant dollars, and monthly AFDC payments in North Carolina are almost $100 less than the average monthly payment nationally.

The needy blind, permanently disabled and elderly receive no cash assistance from the state since North Carolina is among the half of states which do not supplement the federal maximum SSI payment of $340 per month for an individual living alone. By qualifying for the maximum federal food stamp benefit of $55 per month, an elderly individual would have an income of 90 percent of the poverty line.

A second characteristic in the region is the low rate of participation in government programs. People often have to travel long distances by car to enroll in programs, and no public transportation is available for those who do not have access to a car. Also, the high degree of local control can lead to discriminatory judgments of who deserves and doesn't deserve assistance.

In the counties studied, only 42.3 percent of poor children receive Medicaid, compared with 70 percent of poor children nationally. The participation rate for AFDC is even lower. The percentage of poor children receiving food stamps, a totally federally financed program, is higher. Over three-fourths of all poor children in the counties studied received food stamps.

Like most states, pursuant to the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981, North Carolina exercized the option of reducing the value of assets, outside of a home, that may be held by an AFDC applicant or recipient to $1,000. In rural areas, this often means AFDC recipients cannot retain the land and farm equipment which would help them support themselves.

There is no workfare in the counties studied, but several nearby counties conduct workfare programs. For this reason a few members of the sample had had experience with workfare.

Few Good Job Opportunities

Many of the poor in North Carolina work. Because wages in the state are low, it is possible to work at a full time job and remain below the poverty line. The northeast is characterized by large numbers of underemployed residents—those who work, but don't earn enough to support themselves or their families.

In the last few years three principal employers have left the region: Hapco (cut and sew), Bluebell (cut and sew), and Facet (automotive). These firms represented about 500 jobs. Currently, the major employer in the four-county region is Perdue poultry which employs almost 2,000 people at minimum wage jobs. Most of the workers are women. Working conditions in the Perdue plant are described as "horrendous:" long hours, subfreezing temperatures and harassment are mentioned frequently.

Most people now working in the northeast work either at Perdue or at service-related jobs in hotels and fast food restaurants. Other jobs are available at small cut-and-sew firms. These firms are often short-lived and frequently lay off workers when the company's contracted work ends. For men, it is often necessary to travel several hours a day to a job at shipyards located in Newport News, Va., or to food-processing plants in Suffolk, Va. Rush hour in the northeast takes place at 4:00 a.m. It is estimated that 2,500–3,000 North Carolinians travel to Virginia to work every day.

Wages for all these jobs are extremely low. As one community leader put it, "even getting minimum wage is a problem here." Average weekly earnings for Hertford county, for instance, are $239 compared to a national average of $308.

The Need For Government Intervention

Perhaps the most compelling finding in North Carolina was the degree to which people shared attitudes about the causes and cures for poverty, regardless of race, sex, age, employment status or disability. A relatively high number of working people were included in the sample in North Carolina so that their attitudes could be compared with those of the non-working poor. The two groups did not differ significantly in their attitudes about work, government programs, the role of government, or a variety of other issues. Few differences were found between the attitudes of blacks and whites. The exception to this was discrimination, which blacks reported experiencing with much greater frequency.

What did emerge was a uniform set of goals for government action. In general, people stressed that government should take an active role in combatting poverty. Although not everyone favored precisely the same role for government, a wide spectrum of those interviewed stressed the need for government to create jobs, provide training and improve government-sponsored assistance programs. People want jobs that will provide them with adequate income and feel they deserve to get additional help from the government when it's needed.

The Nature Of Unemployment

Unemployment rates in the region are high, and there is little hope that the situation will change in the near future. About half of the North Carolina sample had worked before but were either unemployed or out of the labor force at the time of the interviews. The two major reasons for unemployment were personal circumstances, on the one hand, and the state of the area economy on the other.

Those who have worked in the past attributed their current unemployment to disability or the lack of jobs in the region. Other factors mentioned frequently were the need to care for dependents and the need for education and training. Significantly, several people said that they did not know what would help them get a job or a better job. One woman who graduated from high school, but is now unemployed, said, "I don't know. Everyone I ask say that they're not hiring. I want to be a teacher's aide, but I don't know what could help me get that job."

Although 21 people had been previously employed, only ten ever received unemployment compensation. Most of them received payments of less than $200 a month, which, on an annualized basis, would bring a family of three up to only 27 percent of the poverty line. Although the program provided a minimum subsistence, most who had received unemployment compensation said they thought the benefits were too low.

Most of the unemployed who were interviewed had not worked for over a year; many had not worked for 2 years or more. Many of those not working have never worked and are simply unable to do so. They cited health problems most frequently as the reason they left their previous job and the reason they are now unemployed. Those who have never worked remain unemployed due to their own physical disabilities, old age, or the need to care for disabled or dependent children or other relatives.

The Rural Working Poor

Although most of the 18 working people interviewed held full-time, permanent jobs, many worked at jobs that didn't provide them with enough income to meet their basic needs. Nearly half of those surveyed received no fringe benefits (including health insurance) from their jobs. In addition, the jobs seemed to offer little or no upward mobility or job security. Finally, wages were low. No one interviewed earned more than $250 a week, and almost half earned less than $150.

Another indication of the quality of jobs in the area is that earnings from previous jobs were often higher than current earnings, and several working people are actively looking for other jobs. When asked what they would change about their jobs, people said that they needed higher pay, or the opportunity to earn more by working more hours every week. People worked exclusively at blue collar or service sector jobs, reflecting the dearth of white collar employment in these counties.

Several working people had another family member who worked, usually a spouse. Even with two incomes, these families were living below the poverty line. Regardless of current employment status, the majority of the sample felt that people would *not* be able to support themselves working at a job that paid only the minimum wage.

Desire For Higher Wages And More Jobs

Employed and unemployed members of the sample agreed that the government should create jobs and insure higher wages for jobs that exist. A single parent who works in a factory to support her mother and two children reasoned that:

> "(The government should) change the minimum wage so those who have been at jobs a long time will get some more money. Get jobs for all people."

> "What should the government do? They should raise wage levels, create good jobs. Good ones."

Several comments pointed to the need to create good jobs that require high levels of skill and offer the chance of upward mobility. There is little incentive for residents to acquire skills if they cannot be utilized. An unemployed, single mother who has 12 years of work experience and is now attending college, said:

> "There is not enough industry in this area that will give you the type of job I'm now skilled for . . . they could bring better jobs to this area. Technology. Bring some technology."

Many jobs in northeastern North Carolina are seasonal, temporary, or subject to constant layoffs and shut-downs. This means that even if a person finds a job he or she may be out looking again in a matter of months. A 23-year-old man who was laid off at the Newport News shipyard and is now living on unemployment compensation, asserted:

> "The only thing the government should do is give people jobs and stop the layoffs . . . the government should give the yard some contracts so they can call me back to work.".

Education And Training Don't Help When Jobs Aren't There

People view education and training as prerequisites to obtaining the type of job that will provide them with economic security. Paradoxically, many people in the sample were dropouts, and others had completed training programs that didn't help them obtain jobs.

Although respondents at all educational levels believed that more education or training were the keys to obtaining new or better employment, many also realized that any skills they acquired might be useless given the job market in the area. The North Carolina sample had slightly more high school graduates than the other sites, and three interviewees had at least some college. A few gave the distinct impression that they were overqualified for the kinds of jobs in the area.

A woman who had participated in the CETA job training program, but now works at a job unrelated to the training she received summed up the dilemma:

> "Further education and relocating would help. In this area there is only so much you can do, even with the education."

Another working mother expressed similar frustrations:

> "(I would change) the job training in this area. There are a lot of people in this area who want to work. They don't have the money to get training for jobs. Then, if they have the money to get training, the jobs wouldn't even be here. A lot of intelligent people in the area, if they only had the finances or the training, would do good jobs. Would do nice things for the community."

Few people had actually participated in training programs, and those who had rarely obtained a job as a result. People who had been in a training program felt that the experience would have been more helpful if their training had been linked directly to a job. A 33-year-old, unemployed mother of 4 who had recently been laid off from her job at a sewing factory expressed her frustration with job training programs in the northeast:

> "The ones they have now are just fronts. They are supposed to be on-the-job training, but they don't give you the skills you really need. I need a college education and more skills."

The majority of respondents felt that school had given them adequate levels of skill in reading, writing, and mathematics. High school dropouts were less satisfied with their skills than those who had completed their secondary education. This satisfaction with current levels of skills may reflect the fact that this population has worked primarily at jobs that require few skills and/or the fact that there are so few jobs available in this part of North Carolina that education makes little or no difference in employability.

> "Mostly I can't find anything I'm qualified for, or if I find something I'm too far away from it. . . . More schooling, that would help."

> "I've been in sewing factories for 20 years and they either close down or lay you off, so I decided to get some education."

The 43 percent who were drop-outs included many who left school before tenth grade. People from different generations left school for different reasons. Respondents over age 60 all dropped out before 11th grade. Often, they left school to work on their family's farm. One woman said:

> "When I got old enough to work I had to help my daddy farm. There wasn't anyone to do it but me."

Most younger women dropped out of school because they got pregnant, married, or both. There was very little elaboration on this answer. It seemed self-evident to the interviewees that pregnancy had meant the end of schooling, at least for the foreseeable future. A typical answer was, "I got pregnant, that's all." In contrast, men dropped out for a variety of reasons including lack of interest in school and lack of good teachers or classes.

Assistance Levels Too Low

This sample believed that government has a responsibility to help people out of poverty. Although some people disagreed, many felt that as citizens and as human beings they deserve to get help when it is needed. In addition, people believed that government programs do give people a chance to get on their feet. In spite of their generally positive response to a strong role for government, people saw many ways in which government programs could be improved.

The two most important and consistent issues raised about government programs were in the areas of eligibility and adequacy of benefits. Benefits in North Carolina, as in many southern states, are extremely low.

Both employed and unemployed people cited higher benefit levels as a way that the government could help them support their families. People who made use of AFDC, food stamps, Low Income Energy Assistance and Medicaid were very appreciative of these programs. They saw these programs as helpful in meeting their basic needs for food and shelter, but felt that payments were often inadequate.

As one elderly woman said, "When the government goes up on your check (increases monthly payments), the cost to live goes up higher, so you ain't got nothing." Another frequent response was simply, "It helps pay my bills." In response to questions about food stamps, several people also mentioned the need to buy non-food items that cannot be purchased with food stamps, such as toilet paper and soap.

Most recipients of AFDC and food stamps said that they would not feel good about having to work in order to receive these benefits. They feel that they are entitled to help, and many are unable to work because of a disability or the need to care for dependents. The few people in the sample who had participated in workfare said that the programs made it harder, not easier, to find a job.

When asked what they would change about government programs, the most common answer was that eligibility requirements should be made less restrictive. This was especially true for food stamps and Social Security disability. In spite of their belief in the importance of government programs, program participation rates for food stamps and AFDC were lower in North Carolina than in any other site.

Some people admitted they needed help from government programs, but did not apply to receive these benefits because they were unwilling to go through the difficulty and frustration of the application process, or because they thought they would be found ineligible for reasons other than income. One typical response came from an elderly woman no longer receiving Low Income Energy Assistance. She said, "They (welfare administrators) treat you like you're not worth nothing. You go down in the morning, you have to stay down in the office all day long and then you still might not get it. This year I didn't even try."

The Working Poor Need Help

Northeastern North Carolina illustrates the difficulty faced by people working at low wage jobs who need supplemental income or health coverage if they are to escape poverty.

In 1981, due to a reduction in the AFDC earned income disregard, (which allows a certain amount of earned income to be ignored in the calculation of benefits and remain in the program after becoming employed) many working people lost their eligibility. As a result, many working women in North Carolina are unable to receive AFDC and Medicaid as a sort of wage supplement. This is a particular problem in an area where many people work at low wage jobs which usually do not provide crucial services such as health insurance and day care. People who are working feel that current eligibility standards unjustly penalize them, rather than rewarding them, for working.

A mother of two working forty hours a week for a small manufacturer and living at 65 percent of the poverty level expressed her frustration with current eligibility standards:

> "They have programs, but you have to be on your deathbed to get them. I have asked and asked, but I got no help. People who work are trying to make it and fall on bad times and they can't get help . . . If you go there and ask for help and you're a border-line case like we are, you should get the help you need. Brackets need to be raised a little bit."

Another woman works full-time for the government and supports her disabled husband, her father and three children. The only assistance the family receives is Social Security disability because they are just above the income limits for other programs such as food stamps. She said:

> "A family is struggling to have the *basic* things. Sometimes you are working and you end up worse off. You wonder why you work."

In some cases there is a resentment of the system and those who do get help. A single mother of four young children who works full time asserted that:

> "Working mothers taking care of a family with no help should be equally apportioned a welfare check. They showed they're willing to work and they're working. They need something to balance *their* income. Some people sit home on their butt and they get a check. They always think of helping the one that's not working. What about the working?"

Other people struggle to survive and wonder why they can't get help:

> "They should make those programs a little easier (to receive). Like Medicaid. They should make them easier. I need that program."

Some services are available to working poor people and others who are unable to receive assistance from entitlement programs. People use services to meet needs not met by cash benefit programs or employment. A woman not covered by health insurance at work takes her children to the free local health clinic. When food stamps run out at the end of the month people supplement them by going to a food bank.

In general, respondents found service programs extremely helpful. They were especially grateful for nutrition programs and services that address the needs of children. WIC, Headstart, food banks, health clinics and the free school lunch programs were of particular value.

Those interviewed have to worry about having enough food to feed themselves and their families from day to day. Programs that provided food were rated as relatively more helpful than educational, health, or job training programs.

Discrimination In Employment And Government Programs

Blacks in North Carolina tend to work at jobs that pay lower wages and require less skill than jobs held by whites. Few jobs are available in the area, and the best jobs usually go to white residents. Many residents of North Carolina see discrimination as a significant barrier to employment, and to advancement once they are employed.

> "I feel that in this area, just by being black, if you go to look for employment nine times out of ten you don't get it. A white person gets it . . . The reason I am unemployed, I feel it is a racial thing in this area. When I moved here I had qualifications."

A black woman who works for a small manufacturer was disillusioned with her employer. She has trained white employees to do her job, and has repeatedly seen them promoted while she remains in the same position. She explained:

> "I've been at this job (packing) for 13 years. I climbed no higher. I got to work. I got to haye a job. I've seen whites (who) haven't worked here as long as I have climbing higher. They can (afford to) build brick houses, I can't."

An older woman working at a minimum wage job said:

> "They (the government) don't provide enough jobs for black people, or people with less education or skills. They don't believe in training people and they don't want to pay you enough for the jobs that you do do. They want to work you to death for nothing."

People also experience discrimination in the administration of government programs. One respondent had been turned down for Social Security Disability. Although she is terminally ill with cancer and has undergone several surgeries in recent months, she was told she should be able to work. She protested that:

> "If I had been white I would have already been receiving benefits."

A single mother who supports her family of 5 on $9,600 a yea said:

> "Some people get these benefits with two in the household. I have four. There's discrimination . . . I feel like if I was another color she would have bent a little bit and looked the other way."

One respondent was a 72-year-old woman who worked in local factories for 32 years until she was laid off in 1985. She is now disabled with arthritis and diabetes and is living on the money she receives from Supplemental Security Income, Social Security survivor's benefits, Low Income Energy Assistance, and food stamps, and says, "It's not enough, but what can I do?" She summed up her views of government programs by saying:

> "I don't known but one thing: Government is really prejudiced and they think we ain't got sense enough to know. If I cut my hand, and they cut their hands, the blood will come out just like mine. How have I been affected (by discrimination)? You name it!"

Problems Compounded By Disability

The rate of disability in the North Carolina survey population was extremely high: 35 percent of those interviewed were either disabled themselves or were caring for a disabled family member. Several people were both disabled and caring for another person who was disabled.

No one disabled was working, and many said that their disability prohibited them from doing so. A few people said that their disability (or the disability of the person they cared for) effectively stopped them from working because it so limited the types of jobs available to them. Consequently, the disabled population relies heavily on the Social Security disability program, often in combination with food stamps or AFDC.

Frequently people complained about the difficulty of having to "prove" disability, and said that eligibility requirements for Social Security disability were too strict. One woman had to quit her job as a maid to care for her husband who had had several strokes. He was constantly in and out of the hospital and was bed-ridden much of the time. Because neither could work, both lived on the $751 monthly check he received from the Veterans' Administration. The husband was turned down for Social Security Disability and told he could work, although he had had one stroke, was unable to talk and could hardly walk. Finally, after he had suffered two additional strokes, the couple was judged eligible for SSD.

Another woman had rheumatoid arthritis, hypertension, and seizures. She lived at 55 percent of the poverty level, but had been turned down for Social Security disability. She explained:

> "Ain't no way I can work! I can't even get out of bed. I have pain in my body *all* the time. I didn't get it (Social Security disability) because I didn't have a stack of bills from the ceiling to the floor. Know how I feel about those doctors? They ain't worth the Hippocratic oath!"

The psychological strain of proving disability can be agonizing in itself. A terminally ill cancer patient who had had her large intestine removed and is now too weak to have additional necessary operations for polyps of the colon was told she couldn't receive SSD because she should be able to work. Her mother and sister had recently died of the same disease she now has, and having to prove that she is completely and utterly disabled was excruciating. In spite of the serious nature of her illness she was turned down for assistance from Social Security disability. She said, "I am so sad and depressed about that I don't know what to do with myself. It just makes me want to cry all the time."

The Elderly

As young people leave the region, the elderly represent an increasingly higher percentage of the population in the four counties in the northeast. Of the elderly persons interviewed, all but one were disabled. The disabilities found among the elderly were severe, and several people were immobilized by their health problems.

The elderly poor depend on a combination of Social Security retirement and Supplemental Security Income or other benefits such as Social Security survivors benefits. Medicare is seen as a lifesaver, although several people still had health problems that they currently cannot afford to have remedied. The disabled population had numerous complaints about their interactions with the welfare system. Most frequently, people complained of being pushed around and humiliated in trying to prove their eligibility for Social Security disability.

In spite of their disabilities, a few elderly people said that they would like to work if they could find a job that was compatible with their physical abilities. They had worked hard since they were very young and wanted to continue to contribute to their own expenses.

Housing—Not Much Choice

Residents of northeastern North Carolina routinely report that housing in the area is both inadequate and substandard. Housing in the northeast is older, more crowded, and less likely to have complete plumbing than housing in the rest of the state.

A majority of respondents declined to say they were dissatisfied with where they live. Generally, people said they were satisfied with their housing because of its condition or affordability. People felt that they had to be content with what they had because it was the most they could afford or was better than no housing at all. They commented:

> "I don't have no complaints when I think about people who have nowhere to stay."
>
> "The house is kind of broke up, but I like my neighbors."
>
> "It's a roof over my head."

Those who were not satisfied with their housing were dissatisfied because their homes were substandard or in poor condition, not because it cost too much or was in a poor location.

One Woman's Story

One person interviewed was a 40 year-old, divorced, mother of five. Until 1982, she had worked in a shoe factory. At that time, a doctor determined that she had a spot on her brain and required her to stop working. Since then her economic situation has deteriorated. She would still like to go back to school and get proper training for a good job. If a doctor judges her able to work, and she obtains assistance with child care, she would go to work.

A mother at 13, she later obtained a GED. She still has difficulty reading. When she was still married, her husband refused to help support the children, so she always had to work. Now, her ex-husband pays child support. Her family currently receives AFDC, food stamps, Low Income Energy Assistance, SSI, and Medicaid, yet all of this leaves their income at just 65 percent of the poverty line. She supplements benefits from entitlement programs with help from a variety of services, including WIC, the free school lunch program and food banks.

Child care is an important issue for this interviewee. She has a two-year-old daughter and 27-year-old mentally retarded son living at home. She must care for both of them. She feels especially anxious about her son and says she must always "be watching out for him."

She is dissatisfied with her home because it has no indoor plumbing. The bathrooms are outside and there is no running water in the house. Still, she has not applied for housing assistance. Her principal complaints about the public assistance programs she has enrolled in center on the paperwork and delays that result from a need to follow intricate bureaucratic procedures.

She does not feel that a person should have to work off benefits or work to repay benefits. She states that public assistance should be given with "no strings attached." Because people pay taxes when they work, she believes the government should be willing to help people when they really need it. Like most of those interviewed, she wants the government to help people get jobs. She considers herself poor because she can't seem to make ends meet.

Summary And Conclusions

The problems confronting northeastern North Carolina are not unique to the region. Although some rural communities are flourishing, many are isolated and unable to maintain the type of infrastructure necessary to attract industry and jobs. As the younger, often better educated segments of the population leave to find jobs, residents who remain search for ways to improve their lives. It is difficult to imagine solutions to many of the problems that confront the northeast. Identifying what the poor themselves see as the factors that affect their lives is an important first step.

The study conducted in North Carolina points to a number of problems that the poor feel should be addressed by the government in the near future. Perhaps first among these is the lack of jobs available in the region and the low level of wages paid for jobs that exist.

Workers in North Carolina, as elsewhere, are faced with the prospect of working full-time for wages that do not and will not lift them out of poverty. Nationally, over 41 percent of all adults living in poverty are working. In addition, government entitlement programs are not available to most working people due to strict eligibility requirements.

The working poor are unable to adequately support their families with their salaries alone, and yet these same wages render families ineligible for welfare benefits. The views presented in the survey point to the need for more jobs, higher wages, and increased aid to low income people who work. Those who are eligible for government assistance emphasize that benefits are too low and say that they face discrimination from program administrators.

Chapter Six

A Company Town Without A Company

Aliquippa, Pennsylvania

By Gary Itzkowitz

Aliquippa, Pennsylvania was a company town. Once the site of the largest integrated steel mill in the world, Aliquippa was developed as a planned community and support system for the mill. Located on the Ohio River, the town was part of the series of steel mills and related industries that reside on the rivers flowing into and out of Pittsburgh.

The mill is central to the Aliquippa landscape. It contains mammoth buildings, some several stories high and blocks long, interlocked by massive pieces of machinery and its own railroad. The entire west side of the city rests in the shadow of the mill, dwarfed by its size. The mill property extends over six miles.

At its height, the mill provided ready employment for the local area. Overtime, double shifts and summer jobs for youth were always plentiful. Most full time employees worked at least six days a week for twelve hours a day. Some worked double shifts and talked about losing track of days and their sense of time. But the rewards were considered worth it; many steelworkers earned wages in the $35,000 to $40,000 range.

Steelworkers in Aliquippa are not highly educated, but the lack of education is not evidence of low skill. The local labor force has been credited with high technical abilities by a number of sources. Formal education, however, is perceived as inconsequential to the knowledge and skill used in the mill. Instead, the workers suggest their high skill level is a culmination of generations having worked in the mill, each generation passing accumulated knowledge to the next.

Despite the modern technology of the mill and financial concessions made by the steelworkers to keep their jobs, the mill has fallen on dismal times. Since 1980, a series of layoffs and an eventual bankruptcy by the steel company has reduced the workforce from over 16,000 to only a few hundred. Immense sections of machinery have been removed from the mill. Some parts were sent to other plants owned by the company, and some sections were shipped to places as distant as China.

The impact on the city has been devastating. Once a community of 27,000, the population has declined to around 15,000 and supports only a total of 5,000 jobs. Despite the loss of some

15,000 jobs at the mill, it remains the principal employer in the town. The only other major employer is the local hospital. Unemployment in Aliquippa is estimated to be 30 percent.

At its height, Aliquippa boasted the highest per capita income in the nation. The layoffs have reduced the earned income of Aliquippa by over 50 percent, with as many as 70 percent of the residents now living below the poverty line. A dramatic rise in the crime rate, mental depression, racial tension, and family violence have been reported. For instance, police calls for family disputes increased 80 percent since the layoffs began.

The city is partitioned into specifically planned sections, with the size of homes signifying the position of the owner in the mill. For instance, the section built for managers contains spacious homes with relatively more land. The rest of the town is severely segregated by ethnic and racial boundaries. A series of racially tense events occurred in 1983, including incidents involving the police department. Until 1985, no black had been elected to the city council despite the fact that the black population has now reached 40 percent.

The central business section of Aliquippa is Franklin Avenue. The avenue extends for several blocks and ends at the main gate to the mill. When flourishing, the avenue supported over 200 businesses. Now, Franklin Avenue holds as many unoccupied buildings as occupied, with much of the remaining activity conducted by non-profit community organizations attempting to help people survive the crisis.

The only large grocery store in the downtown area has closed, requiring a trip of at least three miles to avoid paying convenience store prices. The transportation system has been greatly curtailed, however, including the bus route to the large supermarket.

The mass transit problem is directly related to the mill closing. The mill owners created the Greater Aliquippa Transit Authority as a mechanism for transporting workers to the mill. The collapse of the mill brought on the collapse of the transportation system.

Transportation problems highlight more pervasive issues facing the city. The mill had always provided the city with an adequate tax base, but the severe reduction in mill-generated tax revenues places continual pressure on city-run services. The problem is compounded by the impact of the mill closing on local businesses, the general reduction in the population of working age people and the relative increase in the number of poor and elderly.

Private emergency food services, provided mainly by local churches, strain to meet the growing demand, but uniformly have had periods of funding shortages. In 1984, over 4,000 residents were registered to receive free butter and cheese. While government operated services are available, many are located in the county seat, some twenty miles away. Without transportation to get to the services and without funding for agencies to establish outreach programs, some Aliquippa residents who are in need do not receive aid.

Health services are a prevailing problem for those with scarce incomes. According to a study conducted by Penn State University, over 60 percent of the population living in subsidized housing do not see physicians, even though an increase in family illness was recorded. A similar number suggest that they are unable to purchase adequate food.

Those with higher incomes have moved into expensive neighborhoods with lower tax rates and more attractive surroundings. Coupled with the reduction in population caused by people in their twenties and thirties migrating in search of work and a better life, these two factors have combined to make Aliquippa increasingly elderly, poor and black.

The steel mill closing, therefore, has had a direct impact not only on the dislocated workers, but on the long term poor as well. The entry level jobs that those in poverty are most likely to obtain have become keenly competitive. Those who were able have moved. Those remaining are the dislocated workers and long term poor who are the most vulnerable.

Welfare Programs In Pennsylvania

Eligibility for welfare programs in Pennsylvania requires that property, other than one's own home, be put up for sale within ten days of authorization of assistance. The individual must convert the property into cash and acknowledge liability of the property to the state in return for receiving assistance. Only automobiles with a cash value of less than $1,500 are excluded in consideration of property.

Other real and personal property is limited to a total equity of $1000 per family. Claims may be made by the state against a property owner for all assistance paid for the period in which property was owned.

The maximum AFDC and food stamp grants in Pennsylvania bring the recipient to 76 percent of the poverty line, or $382 per month for a family of three. The average AFDC payment is $338 per month. Using constant dollars as a measure, AFDC payments have lost 48 percent of their value from 1970 to 1987. AFDC and food stamps combined have lost 30 percent of their value from 1972 to 1986.

Eligibility for AFDC requires an income less than 55 percent of the poverty line. This level is based on the standard of need established by the state which is further adjusted to account for geographic cost differences. For the largest group of recipients, this amounts to a payment of $348 for a family of three.

Pennsylvania does maintain an AFDC-UP program, which allows the principal earner of a two-parent family to be unemployed and still eligible for AFDC.

The Supplemental Security Income program (SSI) provides monthly cash payments to needy aged, blind, and disabled persons. Pennsylvania supplements the federal SSI payment by $32 per month for an individual. This brings income to 95 percent of the poverty level when food stamps are counted.

Pennsylvania requires that able-bodied AFDC recipients with children over six years of age participate in Work Incentive (WIN) Demonstration programs and in Community Work Experience Programs (CWEP). These programs are run in all 67 counties in the state and place people in part-time jobs as a price for receiving benefits.

WIN includes such programs as job referral, job readiness training and job search. CWEP includes allowances for transportation and other necessary costs through a maximum payment of $25 per month per participant.

The federal minimum wage is used to compute the number of hours the participant must work to continue receiving benefits. There are additional plans for a statewide job search program to be implemented in 1987.

Sample Design And Demographics

Aliquippa is one of four sites where interviews were conducted. Each site was selected both for its particular type of poverty population and because interviewees cumulatively mirror the poverty population in the United States. Age, race, sex, family composition, health, experience with welfare programs, type and level of employment, and geographic location were all taken into consideration.

The Aliquippa sample was weighted toward the "new poor." That is, a conscious attempt was made to interview a high number of unemployed steelworkers living in two-parent families whose income is now beneath the poverty line. Of the total of 52 interviews, 33 were male, 42 were white and almost all were born in Pennsylvania. Most of the people interviewed are married, have one to three children, and are not now working.

In addition, a concerted effort was made to gain a sense of the position of the more long-term poor living in the area in order to compare and contrast the opinions of the two population groups. Ten people interviewed have never been employed at the steel mill and have been receiving benefits for an extended period of time. Of the ten, eight were female, six were white and four were black, one was employed full time, two were disabled and 2 were caring for young children.

Income levels:

- The average monthly earnings of the Aliquippa sample was $252.
- The average income from government benefits was $412 per month.
- The average annual income was $7,994.
- Allowing for the size of family, the average annual income was equal to 72 percent of poverty.
- When asked if they consider themselves poor, 40 percent of the people surveyed said no.

The Government Role

The vast majority of respondents believe that government has a definite role in, and responsibility for, helping people get out of poverty. The role of government is seen as two-fold. First, the government should actively create jobs and manage the economy more effectively. The Aliquippa sample argued forcefully that macro-economic conditions are beyond the individual's control and therefore must be the special domain of the government. If the government refuses this responsibility, then the economic process is left in the hands of corporations. It was the refusal of the government to take an active role that has led to the lack of "good" jobs and stands in the way of people supporting their families.

The second role for government is in relation to education and training. However, this role is seen as highly integrated with the first. Respondents strongly suggested that education and training must have a clear relationship to existing or planned employment. Training for its own sake has no value, and must, therefore, be attached to a general plan that takes into consideration the specific skills and needs of the area.

There are also strong feelings about the government's role in helping people during the period of economic revitalization. Respondents in Aliquippa recommend several steps to improve government programs. They include:

- Increasing benefits,
- Lessening bureaucratic regulations,
- Placing more effective and courteous workers and officials at the welfare office, and
- Relaxing eligibility requirements.

In general, both the new and long-term poor felt that rules and regulations were designed to eliminate people from assistance rolls rather than provide needed aid. Most people in the sample felt they deserved help. They were either unemployed, disabled, taking care of someone who was seriously ill, or caring for young children. Nevertheless, they felt that government programs were organized to serve the fewest possible number of people. As a result, many who were in need of government help received no services.

Unemployed Steelworkers: Our Situation Is Beyond Our Control

One of the critical findings of the study is that macroeconomic conditions merit exceptionally high concern for the unemployed steelworkers. While this is to be expected, the differing forms in which this concern was expressed has ramifications for social programs.

For instance, instead of the common belief that the steel industry's demise is due to outmoded systems of production, the unemployed steel workers argued that they were at the cutting edge of technology.

> "We made the industry stand on its head with our use of technology. We had a state of the art caster. Our crews went to Germany to train and we could make it do things the Germans couldn't. Everybody else is now building casters, but they shut us down."

> "We took the blast furnaces down to a point where everybody thought it was going to blow up. Our by-product was well above EPA standards. But the company got a $400 million tax write-off for shutting down and moved our caster and are running it in Ohio. We are off our jobs through no fault of our own."

Those interviewed repeatedly placed the blame for their present situation on the company.

> "No matter what industry you bring to this region, the tax structure has to be fixed. LTV was making 17 percent profit, but that wasn't good enough so they moved the operation to Ohio where they can make 25 percent."

> "Part of the problem is that the company has five fingers; they can cut off two and starve you while the other three prosper."

> "We gave concessions but it wasn't enough. You take a company like LTV that declares bankruptcy. It gets a huge tax write-off and then gets rewarded with a $190 million aerospace contract from the defense department."

> "At the same time the retirees get their pensions cut almost in half."

> "It's the greed of the big corporations. The only thing they are concerned with is their checkbook and the power they can get with that money."

> "There is one stigma we have to live with. At one time we were one of the strongest unions in the country. We, and the generations that came before us fought for things that have made life easier and better for everyone who works. But now when we go to look for work, the fact that we are union people is a strike against us. Employers even for the least skilled work are afraid to hire union people."

The wrath of the unemployed steelworkers is not limited to the "greed" of the steel companies, however.

> "We've got to bring industry into Beaver county with tax incentives and whatever the federal government can do and, quite frankly, they haven't done squat. They've let my job go down the tubes. They've let my life as my wife and I have known it go down the tubes. They stepped forward for Chrysler, they stepped forward for everyone else, but when it was the steel industry's turn they stepped sideways."

> "The problem didn't start with the federal government, but they could have stopped it. I watch them spend millions on all sorts of foreign affairs projects and I wonder what effect that money would have in this area. It makes me furious."

> "The only reason they are looking at welfare reform is that it is costing them too damn much money. But why don't they look toward the corporations who have made billions and ask them for help. Stop them from dumping that money in investments overseas."

Many steelworkers believe that heavy industry is not gone forever. Yet, there is a clear understanding of the devastating impact of the shut-down.

> "You can't maintain your world status power without basic industry. When steel went down it took a lot of other industries with it. And once heavy industry leaves there is no longer a need for other jobs like auto-mechanics and welders."

The steelworkers feel strongly that the region has a uniquely skilled labor force that would be criminal to squander. But new industry, and training programs designed for new industries, must take into account the abilities and previous training of available workers.

> "There is knowledge of industry here that can't be replaced. We have mechanical aptitudes and abilities gained from four generations of families who worked in the mills."

> "We've made the industry stand on its head with our use of technology, but training targeted for high tech doesn't take advantage of the region."

> "If somebody wanted to set a program for this area they would account for the skill of the labor force. You can bring in any kind of industry that has anything to do with machinery and we'll show you how to make it run. We'll show the world how to make it run. This has been stated in many articles and magazines by experts. Well then, why would you bring me a computer? Bring me a pump, a turbine, an automobile engine, something with nuts and bolts in it and let me work. If you want me to plug wires into a board—take it to California. Let's match talents."

There are other criticisms of training programs. Like everyone else in the area, the training program administrators were caught by surprise by the mill closing. Where their previous efforts were designed to help the hard to serve poor obtain a skill, training programs abruptly found themselves with 15,000 unemployed, but multi-skilled, steelworkers in need of retraining.

> "I looked at JTPA, and they are not for me. They train automechanics and there are probably 10,000 unemployed automechanics in Beaver County right now. Or training welders—there are no jobs for welders. And refrigeration and air conditioning, when there is no need for it in the winter."

One potentially useful program is the Trade Re-Adjustment Assistance Program (TRA), which provides education and relocation services for dislocated workers. Unfortunately, in practice, TRA is highly restrictive. To be eligible, workers must have been employed at the worksite at the precise time of their division's certification for the program. Those who were laid-off earlier or who work for affected related industries are not eligible.

> "TRA is probably one of the best programs anyone ever invented. I just wish it applied to more."

The impact of these developments on the social fabric of the area has been direct.

> "You look at your phone bill, gas bill, mortgage. Which are you going to pay? You are always robbing Peter to pay Paul."
>
> "So many people thought they were entering the happy part of their lives, but now their children moved back in with them and they are raising grandchildren all over again."
>
> "I know a lot of families that have both parents working seven days a week at low wages trying to hang on to what they can no longer afford. How can you do that and not have it have a detrimental effect on the family."
>
> "I had to sell everything we owned. Who knows what the psychological effects are. I have a 10-year-old boy who still can't understand why he doesn't have his 13 acres (to play on)."

> "When people get into situations like these it breaks down their health and even when someone gets sick they don't have the time or money to go to the doctor. It would take away from their food money."
>
> "Why doesn't the greatest country in the world have free health care like they do in Mexico and Canada? If we don't get some relief in May with what is going on with the retirees, you're going to see a bunch of suicides" (Due to a bankruptcy agreement between LTV and the federal government, the retirees' pensions were due to be cut an additional 17 percent over previous cuts.)
>
> "You've had suicides in this county. You have more abuse."

The unemployed steelworkers clearly feel that a minimum wage job will not be enough to support their families.

> "I've got a brother who is making slightly more than the minimum wage, and his wife is working at the minimum wage. They've got three kids and they are falling further and further behind each month."
>
> "Is the minimum wage enough to live on? Well, I suppose. If you are single. Don't have any kids. And live in a car. Then you might be able to make it."
>
> "Any job at the minimum wage puts me down the tubes."

First Experience With Welfare

For many, changes in economic conditions have led to their first direct experiences with welfare. The experience has not been agreeable.

> "The way the system works is that you work your guts out for many years, get laid off through no fault of your own, you get unemployment insurance but it runs out with no jobs in the area, and then welfare forces you to go bankrupt before they will help."
>
> "The system is designed to eliminate people who are in need. If your unemployment is $28 too much, you get no help at all. Or they say you can't own anything of value. If you have a car, it can't be worth more than $1,500, but any car not worth that much you have to pour money into. How can you look for a job with a car like that? And if you do own a car worth more than $1,500, you are supposed to sell it, live off that money until it runs out and then go back and see them. It's chaotic, especially with no mass transportation system in this area."
>
> "There is almost no release of information about programs. People find out by word of mouth—you run into somebody you know who has tried to get on it."

"The real problem is that you have to lie to get any real help, and that is a hard thing for an area that has prided itself on its honesty. If you go in and tell the truth you get nothing. If you own an insurance policy that you have paid into for ten years, all of a sudden it has cash value and you get nothing."

"We have an acre of land that we use as a garden to grow food. At one time, I thought I might build a house there, but I found out that you needed to have an acre and a half. We went to get recertified for food stamps and the caseworker told us to sell our acre. I looked at her and said, 'Well I'm not going to sell it.' She said that in order to continue to get food stamps we had to sign a piece of paper which would let her sell the land. Now that acre ain't worth nothing, if you can't build a house and I wasn't going to sell it for $100. So I said no, and we got cut off from food stamps and Medicaid."

"In order to get relief you have to bring every stool sample you had since you were two years old. They screwed up my benefits two years ago and now they want complete re-documentation. What do you figure they do with those records. You need your own personal secretary to deal with those people."

Workfare—working off your benefits—is not seen as a viable answer for most unemployed steelworkers.

"To me it sounds like slavery, one step up from the plantation, especially if there is no strong move by policy makers to create jobs."

"If you weren't treated like real workers it would be like being on parole. And if your parole officer didn't like you, then you would get kicked off."

"Would these jobs be taking away someone else's job, and would I be working for less than someone else doing the same job? In that case the program stinks, it becomes a benefit for business, not for people.

"Acceptance of a job like that could only be grounded by whether your standard of living would rise or fall. If it's going to fall you're not going to do it."

"Let's put workfare at least on the basis of the poverty level (to bring income up to the poverty line), not the level of benefits received, and then combine that with a program that will help the region."

"What about the indirect costs? You've got overhead for gas and lunch and everything else, and even if they help you with things like child care and transportation costs, where are the jobs."

"Workfare without worker protections is a throwback to the mule days. You know, when a man and a mule were trapped in the mine the foreman shouted, 'Save the mule first. It cost me $20. I can always get another man.' "

The actions that the unemployed steel workers would take to escape their predicament are similar to the thousands who have made the same decisions over the last few years.

> "I was in school for awhile, but after school your only proposition is to move. But even if you move to where jobs are, the pay is only $5.00/hr. How can you survive living away from home and supporting your family that is still here. The American dream is a false dream, just like it was a false dream to believe that you could own your own home."

> "I am going to finish my schooling and then do what everybody else in Beaver County is doing—look for a minimum wage job. And if I can't survive I'll have to move out, sell my house at one-half what I bought it for or just abandon it and start all over again. In ten years at another location, I'll be back to the point I was 10 years ago. I'll have lost 20 years out of my life, and that's assuming I don't work for some new company that decides to move their operation to Brazil."

The Long-Term Poor: We Need Schooling, The Region Needs Jobs

For the purposes of this site study the long-term poor were defined as those who had never worked in the steel mill and had been receiving benefits for an extended period of time. Ten people in the study fit this description.

The long-term poor in Aliquippa had comparable views to those in essentially the same position in other sites. The main reason the long-term poor cited for their unemployment/underemployment was child care responsibilities. While they agreed with the rest of the Aliquippa sample that education and training is important, they again added child care as something that would help them get the kind of job or income they need to support their families.

> "And they only allow $160 per month for babysitting in workfare, but I ended up paying $360."

Long-term recipients were also more likely to have a positive attitude toward workfare, although they had little direct experience with the programs. Those who had participated in workfare programs were considerably more likely to feel negatively about the experience.

> "Workfare is not an incentive to work. You have some people who have never had a paycheck. Give them wages and a paycheck as an incentive, not the same old benefits."

> "There should be an agreement between the welfare office and those who hire under workfare. A proved workfare worker (who performed well on the job) should have the first shot at any job that becomes available at the job site."

> "Workfare must take transportation needs into account. I had to take care of the car, pay for gas, insurance. Now how am I supposed to be able to do that when all I get is my welfare benefits?"

In general, the long term poor said the federal government should tend to such macro-economic issues as reducing foreign competition and the need for regional economic development. Along with the rest of the Aliquippa sample, they strongly suggested that the government should be active in the creation of jobs.

> "We might as well not kid ourselves. I can talk about all the things I need, but the few jobs that are there, and are going to be there in the future, are skilled jobs. Now how many training programs are aimed at those jobs? Where are the jobs that people are being trained for?"

> "The job has to be created before the training program. Otherwise, what do you do after you finish training."

Another general view of the long-term poor is that government programs do not always give people a chance to get on their feet. While the sample as a whole viewed government programs quite favorably in this regard, the long term recipients' answers were mixed. Many of the negative feelings toward government programs reflected a frustration with program inefficiency and failure to deliver the needed services when they would be most useful.

For instance, the AFDC changes adopted in 1981 that require monthly reporting of income have hindered, not helped, recipients get on their feet.

> "The bureaucracy is so slow. By the time you report something the process is so slow that you can't pay your bills in the months that your income goes down. If you make more money one month, they record that right away, but if you make less money it takes them forever."

> "My husband was on unemployment and then got an extension. The welfare people said to call when the extension ran out. It ran out and he still didn't find any work. I called welfare and they said they couldn't do anything for two months. In the meantime, I had three kids at home with no income at all. I went down there, I was mad, and talked to a manager. I said, 'I'm worried about feeding my kids, Christmas can wait, but I've got to feed my kids.' He said I would get food stamps within three days. Now why did the caseworker say two months and the manager three days?"

> "I've been on welfare for fourteen years. I've worked that whole time, but no matter what I do I can't seem to get ahead."

Unlike the rest of the sample which cited the lack of jobs as the main object that stood in their way in supporting themselves and their families, the long-term poor ranked the lack of education as the most important. One recipient, who had been through several training programs and faced the regional lack of jobs, clearly saw the need for an emphasis on education. However, when her son, whom she described as very bright, entered the local community college, she faced cuts in her benefits. She felt this was a misplaced priority and said:

> "When a person has been successful at even the first step in educating themselves, the whole welfare system should be designed to allow that person to continue their education. Other than that, the only way you can get people off of welfare is to create decent jobs that fit the skills of the people."

The government could help in individual cases by raising benefit levels and developing support services, creating jobs and providing adequate education and training. All were cited equally by the long-term poor.

> "The government should set the figures for poverty and guarantee that the basic needs of families are met that are equal to those needs."

> "For women with children it is particularly hard. First you have to pay for child care and then you have a transportation system that does not serve the black community. You either have to know somebody with a car, or you have to pay somebody to take you. It costs $7 dollars just to go to the grocery store, $10 to the mall, and $25 one way to Pittsburgh."

> "They have different levels of tests just to get in the training. I took a test to be trained on computers, but the test was nothing but geometric figures. I don't think anyone in that room passed. It was probably designed that way."

> "When you go through training for 12–18 weeks and you compete with somebody who has a degree, who do you think they pick first?"

Welfare Discourages Work And Education

The long-term poor do have a skeptical opinion of the basic welfare programs.

> "For every dollar you make, the government takes two of it. The system is set up so that they give a certain amount for shelter and clothing, but there is never enough for basic essentials."
>
> "People on welfare have to develop a system of lay away. Hygienic needs cannot be purchased (with food stamps), cleaning supplies or detergent. Food stamps are OK, but nine times out of ten the food doesn't last. Sometimes you just borrow money from loan sharks and other places."
>
> "People want jobs, but if I even find a part-time job and I report that to my caseworker, she takes the gross amount and deducts that from my benefits. Not even the take home, the gross amount."
>
> "The number of hours you work might vary from week to week, and the welfare office is behind a couple of weeks, so at the very time you need the money most is when you might not get it."
>
> "If you go out and try to make a certain amount of money, you are going to lose that medical card. In other words, the extra amount of money is just going out the window."
>
> "When my husband took out his student loan to go to school, they took away our food stamps and then took away our medical card because he had a minimum wage job."
>
> "I have a child who is very bright and trying to go to a community college, but they cut him off of welfare, even though he still lives at home. So now there is less to go around. It's like they try to penalize you for trying to help yourself."

The dilemma of the long-term poor is best described by the following woman's story. After abusing the woman and her child, the husband deserted the family. Although she has developed and acted on several strategies to escape poverty and has two years of college, the welfare system seems to have hindered rather than helped her.

> "I used to have a part-time job as a nurse's aid, but with transportation costs and child care costs and what they cut down on my food stamps because I was working, I was getting $200 less for working. I couldn't afford to do that to my kids . . .
>
> "For the last six weeks I have been volunteering a few hours a week at the career center at the local college and have been training to become a counselor. Once they started to help with my child care and transportation costs, I was told I had to sign up for workfare or they would terminate my check . . .

> "Well, what I really want to do is go back to school and get a counseling degree so I could get away from this mess. But if I go to school they will make me sign up for workfare because they say if you can go to school then you can go to work . . .
>
> "But I know if I work I will have less money than I do now, and if I work how can I go to school and take care of my two babies?"

Summary Of Findings

Education and Training:

- The availability of mill jobs rendered education relatively unimportant, but most of the sample believed that their reading, writing, and math skills are still adequate for the kind of job they wanted to obtain.
- The majority of respondents had been in a training program, but said that the training did not help them obtain a job. Most respondents felt that training could be made more helpful if the programs were linked directly to a job.

Housing:

- Respondents gave relatively low marks to their housing situation, citing sub-standard conditions as the main problem. The expense of housing was mentioned as a second reason.
- Many unemployed steelworkers feel "stuck" in their homes. Property values have dropped dramatically, with homes selling for half of what they did ten years ago. Those people with high equity in their homes feel they cannot afford to sell, even if they could find buyers.

Disability:

- Over one third of the sample are either themselves disabled, impaired or seriously ill or are taking care of someone who is. These illnesses greatly reduce both the ability to work and the types of jobs that can be taken.
- The loss of health benefits when the layoffs occurred, and the lack of benefits associated with currently available service sector jobs, places a severe limitation on the ability of the disabled and their caretakers to work. Employment would mean the loss of greatly needed Medicaid benefits.

Employment:

- Only ten people surveyed are currently employed, and most work in part-time service sector jobs. Almost all earn $150 or less per week and receive no benefits.

- Only one person has never held a job. Most were previously employed as blue collar and service workers. When working, their income was considerably higher. The overwhelming reason cited for the current lack of work is layoffs. Most people have been unemployed for two years or more and many for considerably longer periods.
- Almost everyone responded that they were still looking for work and that the minimum wage was not enough to support themselves and their family. While the minimum wage as a means of support was more likely to be viewed positively by those who are receiving, or have received, AFDC and General Assistance, the large majority of this group still think the minimum wage is an insufficient means of support.
- Most people claim that the primary reasons for their unemployment is the macro-economic factors affecting the lack of jobs, the increasing competition even for the lowest paying jobs, the mill layoffs, foreign competition and the "greed" of corporations.
- In many of the families, the spouse, often the woman, is working at least at a part-time job. For those whose spouse is not working, the main reasons given are that they are caring for someone in the family, cannot work due to health reasons or the spouse was also laid off from a job.

Welfare Programs:

- Almost the entire sample has had some experience with welfare programs. 48 people have used food stamps; 42, Medicaid; 42, Low Income Energy Assistance; 33, unemployment insurance; and 30, AFDC or general assistance.
- When asked about the least helpful thing about food stamps the program was criticized as having inadequate benefits, but the program was also clearly given credit for its ability to at least provide survival at the subsistence level.
- Medicaid received high marks, primarily for its very existence. The major criticism of Medicaid was that it does not always provide all the services needed.
- The Low Income Energy Assistance Program was also used often and received very little criticism. Its strong points were the obvious: it helped pay the utility bills.
- AFDC and general assistance were also criticized for inadequate payments when recipients were asked to describe the least helpful aspect of the program. But these programs were also uniformly appreciated for providing for some of the basic needs.
- These same programs were selected as the most helpful to the individual and to the poor in general. The ranking of programs in order of helpfulness, was food stamps, AFDC and general assistance, Medicaid and Low Income Energy Assistance.

Workfare:

- Of the four sites surveyed, the Aliquippa sample had the most direct experience with workfare programs. The 10 people with direct workfare experience were evenly split between feeling good and bad about having to participate. Most, however, felt the experience made it harder to find a regular job, primarily because the workfare job did not afford time to conduct a job search for permanent employment.
- When those with experience with welfare programs were asked how they would feel about participating in workfare, the majority responded negatively. Those who responded negatively often cited the fact that they wanted to obtain a "regular job." Those who responded positively most often said that participation would lead to a feeling of self worth or "paying back."
- Other factors made participation in workfare programs more or less desirable. If the program included training, a guaranteed job after a certain period of time, help in finding a regular job or support services like child care and transportation, the desire to participate was very high. Educational opportunities also increased the desire to participate in workfare, although at a much lower rate. This may be due to the fact that schooling was necessary to get jobs previously available.
- If, however, the workfare program did not include health coverage, if it was not full-time or paid only the equivalent of the minimum wage, did not include employee rights like grievance procedures or if work problems could result in some loss of benefits, the desire to participate decreased almost to zero.

Service Programs:

- Except for the WIN program, which was the only program listed that received more negative than positive responses, most service programs received uniformly high marks from respondents.
- Those service programs that were viewed as especially helpful were free school lunch/breakfast, food banks/cheese distribution/soup kitchens, the women, infant's and children's supplemental food program (WIC), and free health clinics.
- Nearly 90 percent of the families in the sample used food banks, nearly 80 percent free school lunches, over half have used WIC, and over 40 percent have used free health clinics.

Discrimination:

- Almost half of the people surveyed also felt they had been affected by discrimination. With the population made up mostly of white males, the respondents cited age as the primary discrimination. Most felt that potential employers discriminated against them because younger workers more easily accepted low pay and poor working conditions.
- Some evidence of race and sex discrimination was recorded among the small population of women and people of color in the sample, especially discrimination at the worksite.

Summary And Conclusions

The Aliquippa survey might have been carried out in many other areas of the country. The history, geography and politics of specific states vary, but unemployed steelworkers do not differ greatly from other people who have lived in previously thriving, and now depressed, areas.

When the depressed area is rural or a small town, the problems are especially acute. Depressed areas frequently developed a dependency on one or two basic industries which were particularly sensitive to recent economic downturns. In the corporate rush to move operations to areas that generate higher rates of profit, to develop increased efficiency through technical innovation, and to hire workers who are not unionized, companies have abandoned communities and left in their wake millions of dislocated workers, many of whom have become the "new poor."

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics and a new study by the National Committee for Full Employment, dislocated workers are growing at the rate of 2 million per year. The general economic "recovery" has not slowed the process.

As in Aliquippa, dislocated workers throughout the country tend to experience lengthy periods of unemployment and face the prospect of greatly reduced earnings when they return to work. Moreover, the loss of work-related benefits, particularly health insurance, is a critical issue since health problems are one result of poverty.

The response by many small towns and rural areas has been to attempt to diversify the economy. There are serious obstacles to this process, however. Often, diversification comes in the form of service sector employment or occasionally high tech assembly jobs. In either case wages are often significantly lower than in the past.

In Aliquippa, community based organizations have launched an attempt to induce regional economic development. A high-tech incubator has been established. Efforts are underway to declare Aliquippa an enterprise zone. A regional food cooperative is being planned. Finally, there is a multi-million dollar plan to revitalize the Franklin Avenue corridor which is close to being adopted and funded by private foundations. Even if these efforts are successfully brought to fruition, it has been estimated that only a total of 500 jobs would be created.

What has gone undocumented is the number of dislocated workers who eventually need help from welfare programs and the length of time that they receive benefits. The Aliquippa study seems to suggest that the fate of many dislocated workers is to engage in a lengthy relationship with the welfare system.

A central issue that was not highlighted in the study, but deserves great attention, is the different impacts of dislocation on various segments of the population. Women and minority workers who become dislocated face even greater hardships than the predominantly white sample in the Aliquippa study.

According to the NCFE study, Hispanics and blacks suffer higher rates of dislocation than do whites, and while women have lower rates of dislocation, once dislocated, they have longer periods of unemployment than white men.

Black workers have twice, and black women three times, the unemployment period as white men. It is black job dislocation that has fueled the high rates of black unemployment in the 1980s.

Once dislocated workers re-enter the labor force, average earnings are reduced by about 16 percent, and this holds true for both men and women blue collar workers. Women in the service sector, however, suffer twice the average loss of men.

Thus, like every other segment of those in poverty, the "new poor" are a diversified group of people facing unique problems and conditions. Developing appropriate responses to their needs requires that their diversity be recognized and that long-run solutions address the macro conditions which set the parameters for poverty.

With millions of lost jobs and with limited resources, even effective community based economic development will have limited impact. Only active participation by the federal government in the development of jobs, and re-education and training in preparation for those jobs, can give dislocated workers hope for significant recovery.

As one unemployed steelworker said:

> "First, let me keep my head above water. Let me keep my dignity until some new industry is in place. Then develop a plan for the region and create jobs and re-train people if you have to. You've got to have something to dream for."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Language Barriers And Poverty

San Antonio, Texas

by Carolyn Farrow Garland

San Antonio is considered one of the most beautiful cities in the Southwest. Graced with an Old World charm reminiscent of Spain and Mexico, it is very popular among tourists and convention planners. The city leaders, always striving to diversify and expand the economy, have capitalized on the city's charm. Thanks to the downtown development of attractions like the Riverwalk, the Alamo and the Mercado, as well as the current restoration of the Franciscan missions and the old mission trail, San Antonio holds the promise of continued prosperity.

The city of San Antonio has just over 800,000 people and is the third largest city in Texas. Of the total, 52 percent are of Hispanic origin. Blacks make up 7 percent of the population, and the 41 percent who are white are mainly of German or English ancestry.

The city is experiencing steady growth, which between 1970 and 1980 totaled 20 percent. Brought on partly by migration from the north to the Sunbelt, the population boom is heavily affected by the flow of immigrants from Mexico and Central America. As a result, competition for jobs is keen, especially for entry level positions.

Unlike other major cities in the Sunbelt, San Antonio has not experienced a sharp decline in economic growth as a result of the recent decrease in oil prices and production. In the last quarter of 1986, San Antonio and the surrounding Bexar County posted a modest gain in employment of 2.2 percent. Although some economic sectors have suffered (residential and commercial construction, as measured by new building permits, were down by 10.3 and 4.2 percent respectively), the losses were offset by gains in sales and retail trade. Employment in the service sector also increased significantly. A new bio-technology industry is now taking hold in the area.

The presence of several military bases is an important factor in the city's stable economy. They employ over 43,000 people, nearly one-fourth of the civilian labor force. One of the installations, a training center, brings in a continuous stream of new recruits. Another houses the U.S. Air Force School of Aviation Medicine, while a third is home to Brooks Army Medical Center.

Federal government jobs are considered by many to be among the most secure, so it is not surprising that some people in the survey said they would be better off if they could get a job at Fort Kelly or Fort Sam Houston. During the last quarter of 1986, government employment remained steady.

Everyone does not benefit equally from the city's prosperity. According to 1983 statistics, 18.5 percent of Bexar County residents live at or below the official poverty line. Hispanics and blacks are over-represented among the poor. The rate for Hispanics is 26.8 percent and for blacks 25.4 percent. Neighborhoods on the south, west and east sides have high concentrations of poor people. Most of those interviewed were from these communities. As is typical for cities in the southwest, the poorer neighborhoods are on the outskirts of town as well as in the inner city.

The statistics on poverty do not tell the full story, for there are many positive signs of progress in poor communities. San Antonio has several very active neighborhood and community organizations, which have helped to improve the quality of housing, the physical condition of neighborhoods, and health services, particularly for the elderly. Primarily because of the change from at-large to district elections, efforts by minority groups to build political power have resulted in their being represented at every level of government. For the first time in it's long history, San Antonio has an Hispanic mayor.

Still, community leaders admit to having lost ground in recent years. Due in part to federal budget cutbacks, progress toward improving the quality of life for the poor is still very slow.

Welfare Programs In Texas

Welfare programs in the state of Texas are among the most restrictive in the nation.

Unemployed husband-and-wife families with children are automatically excluded from the AFDC program even if their income would otherwise be low enough to qualify. The maximum 1987 AFDC payment to a mother and two children is $2,568 per year, or 29 percent of the poverty level. When food stamps are included, the level of support for such a family reaches about 55 percent of the poverty threshold.

The state operates a Work Incentive Demonstration Program (WIN), though not in all parts of the state. Participants must perform a job search, but at this point are not required to work off benefits in a workfare-type program.

The state of Texas does not supplement the federal Supplemental Security Income program (SSI) payment to needy aged, blind and disabled persons. The maximum monthly SSI payment of $340, thus, leaves individuals living independently at 75 percent of the poverty line when combined with the maximum amount of food stamps. For aged couples living together the payment of $582 reaches 77 percent of the poverty line.

Sample Design And Demographics

San Antonio was selected as one of four sites in a national survey of two hundred poor and low income people. Interviews were designed to elicit ideas and opinions from people who are experiencing, or have experienced, poverty, to learn directly from them what the government's role should be in helping to improve their situation. Sites were chosen to highlight the problems of a specific poverty population including: unemployed steel workers, rural, and urban poor. When combined, the interviews from the four sites mirror the characteristics of the poverty population in the United States as a whole.

Poverty among Hispanics was the primary focus of the San Antonio sample. Forty-one Mexican Americans were interviewed. The other nine interviews were with black residents under the poverty line. Given that Hispanics are the fastest growing minority group in the United States, and one of the poorest, their situation and ideas warrant attention from policy-makers and scholars. Undocumented immigrants were purposely excluded from the survey because they are not eligible for most of the programs which were the subject of discussion.

A major consideration in this analysis was a determination of the differences, if any, between Hispanics who are poor and other groups. For example, do Hispanics experience any unique forms of discrimination, and are the barriers to employment, education or training greater because of ethnic origin or language? Also, what is their evaluation of programs designated to assist the poor?

The sample in San Antonio consisted of 31 women and 19 men. Fifteen were between the ages of 16 and 25; 29 were age 25–60 and six were 61 years or older. Six were purposely selected because they were migrant farm workers either now or in the past.

Forty-two percent had incomes of between zero and fifty percent of the poverty line. Two of these had no means of support at the time of the interview. The average income from private sources or earnings was $203 per month; the average received in the form of public benefits was $403. Combined benefits and private funds provided an average annual income of $7,352, or sixty-one percent of the poverty level. Given these extremely low averages, it is interesting to note that the number in the San Antonio sample who considered themselves poor (62 percent) was equal to those in Pennsylvania who had generally higher income levels.

Literacy Problems A Key

The most compelling finding of the survey in San Antonio was the lack of basic educational skills. The inability to read, write, compute and communicate orally in English is a serious problem for the Spanish-speaking people interviewed. (Spanish is spoken in 43 percent of the area's households). More of the San Antonio respondents had dropped out of school, and at earlier ages, than those in the other interview sites.

The lack of proficiency in English has a circular effect. Illiteracy in English has limited Hispanics' ability to get good jobs; and the lack of good jobs has contributed to their inability to obtain a good education. Immigrants from Mexico have come to this country largely to seek better economic opportunities, but they have historically occupied jobs like farmwork which have not required fluency in English or the ability to read and write. One-fifth of farmworkers over the age of 35 have never entered a classroom. As a result, they are ill-prepared for most of the new jobs created in the "information age." Meanwhile, the poverty associated with farmwork and other manual labor has made it harder for many Hispanics to continue in grade and high school, let alone go on for a college education.

Having a limited ability in English and a higher degree of poverty is compounded by the fact that San Antonio respondents had larger families to support and had experienced failure in school. Problems with the school, teachers and classes were also more prevalent in the San Antonio sample.

Thirty of the fifty people interviewed had less than a tenth grade education. About one-third of the sample said they were deficient in the basic reading, writing, and math skills needed to get a job. In addition, several people said that they were unable to write or read well enough to recognize even simple phrases. As one man said, "Anyone can make a fool out of me. I can't read my own name."

Most of those who could not read or write at all left school in order to work in the fields. Many are now unable to do manual labor because of their age or poor health, especially back problems. Yet some are still middle aged and would be expected to continue participating the labor force. Caught in the transition from rural to urban living, members of this generation are victims of the rapidly changing demands of the labor market:

> "I went to school but I never finished, not even first grade. I have been a farmer all of my life. My father died and I was the only one in our family who could work the fields. I don't know how to read or spell."
>
> "If I could read and write, I would be at City Hall with (Mayor) Henry Cisneros and not have to work like a fool."
>
> "I would have finished school if I didn't have to work. There were ten of us and my mom. I can do very little reading and I can't write."

The lack of basic literacy was much less common among the younger people interviewed. However, this group also dropped out of school at high rates. The reasons are slightly different from those of their parents. Although it was less common for the younger generation to have left school in order to work in the fields, most indicated they needed to get a job, help out at home or simply get on with their lives. Young women often quit because they were pregnant or wanted to get married. Several said they were "sick of school," indicating that it was a waste of time since they were not learning anything anyway. Despite a Supreme Court order that schools teach English, a few felt that the schools had failed them.

> "I wasn't interested in school. I dropped out to help my parents, and I got pregnant right away."
>
> A woman in her thirties said, "I failed eighth grade, so I just quit."
>
> A 19-year-old said, "It was the school's fault. They messed up my records."
>
> A 16-year-old explained, "Kids pick on me. The principal should help but nothing is done. It would be better to get a GED, (but) the guys hanging around the school would beat me up."
>
> And another young man, who has learning problems, said, "Teachers didn't help me. Kids made fun of me because I cannot speak clearly." He went on to say that he can't remember things and feels that he is unable to learn.

Some of the older interviewees stressed the hope that their children and grandchildren would get the kind of education that they never had so that their lives would be better.

> "My kids don't know how to read and I can't help them because I don't know. I wish they would realize how much they need an education." He complained that the teachers weren't doing enough to help.

High Desire For Education And Training

When asked, San Antonio respondents said lack of education was the main thing standing in the way of supporting themselves and their families.

Training and/or education was second only to a job creation as the main thing that they thought government should provide to help the poor generally.

> "Put us into training that would help find a good paying job."
>
> "People need training, but don't have the means to pay for job training. I don't have a lot of experience for a good job. It makes me afraid to go look."

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Another point related to training is worth noting. Women in the sample were more likely than men to say they needed job training. Several women specified that training and education were necessary for their husbands.

> "Give my husband a break. Send him to school. If my husband is told he has to go to school he will. There are a lot of us that think about going back but we won't unless somebody makes us go."

Another said, "We need job training for men."

Training Programs Often Fail

Almost half of the respondents had been in a training program and the majority of them said that it did not lead to a job.

Their reasons were as varied as the individuals themselves, but the lack of an educational component in the training program was cited more often in San Antonio than in other interview locations. Even those who found jobs were critical of the training they had received.

> "I trained to be a gas station attendant. I got a job but I didn't know how to read or write out bills or receipts, so they let me go."
>
> "Not a good job, but I did get a job. It (the training) helped me get a job but not the type of job I wanted."
>
> "Yes they helped me find a job, but I was not prepared. Training only lasted six months and I had speech therapy only three weeks. If only they had trained me longer. I have a hard head and it is hard for me to learn."

Some quit training programs to pursue other interests or because they had family or transportation problems which prevented them from continuing. Several felt the program did not last long enough for them to acquire the skills they needed. Women particularly mentioned that they had no one to take care of their children.

Children And Family First

The second major theme to differentiate the Texas sample from other sites was the strong sense of responsibility to family, especially children, as evidenced from observed living arrangements and responses to questions.

For one thing, large families were prevalent. Thirty-two of the respondents had four or more children, and seven had nine or more. Obviously, the larger the family, the more difficult it is to get the kind of job which will raise family income above the poverty line. And, because Texas has no AFDC program when both parents are present, several of those interviewed who were unemployed had no income whatsoever.

Those in the survey were willing to extend a helping hand to family members even when this meant further hardship for themselves. The best expression of this was the number of persons who shared housing with extended families. Several young couples in their teens started out living with in-laws or parents. These young families seldom had jobs which provided enough for them to pay their own way entirely. In other cases, a family member who fell on hard economic circumstances would move in with relatives.

Helping relatives meant that an already fragile economic situation often got worse. One man in his thirties, recovering from an illness, said his mother "lives nearby and gives us a little help when she can."

While such help was always a sacrifice, occasionally it was done with the idea that it would make the future better. A young married man, age 19, lives with his wife's parents and their two children while he goes to college. He conveyed a strong sense of confidence and felt that by getting an education, he would eventually be able to provide for himself and his family.

The dedication to children (one older couple proudly proclaimed having 19) came in comments sprinkled throughout the interviews.

> "My children come first."
>
> "I made a decision to help my children," said another woman when asked about AFDC.

Concerns about children governed what many women (and men) thought about their jobs or the prospects of their leaving the home to go to work.

> "My husband's main concern is the baby," answered one mother when asked the reason she wasn't working.
>
> "I am going to apply for a job as a cook because the children will have insurance."
>
> "I chose the job because of my children's age. Their safety is more important. This is a poor housing environment. This job allows me to see my children off to school and back home safe. I would get a different job if I could find a sitter that I could really trust, someone I could count on, not someone who would come one day and stay home the next."
>
> "I have to take care of my mother and my grandchildren."
>
> "I need a babysitter for my children. They come first, then us."
>
> "(Government should) set up day care centers where it wouldn't be too expensive. (Then) I could go to work."

"I have a lot of trouble with the kids here, staying here by themselves. So this is my last month working. I don't know if I can make it when I'm not working," said one woman who lived in the barrio and was helping in her mother's small business.

"Some people cannot rely on themselves, like mothers with children under four years. They need to stay at home and they need (government) help."

Government Should Help Its People

The majority of those interviewed in San Antonio believe that the government has a responsibility to help the poor. There were two aspects to this responsibility. The first was the belief that the poor are unable to help themselves, and, that, without government assistance, simply could not survive. Secondly, the extent of foreign aid and witting or unwitting aid to undocumented workers justifies better support of American citizens in need, including those of Spanish origin.

> "Poor people are the main ones who need help. They don't have much education, they have may children and need child care."
>
> "(Government should help) because they cannot help themselves. If the government can't, or won't, who will? Give them something to help themselves."

The second sentiment was quite strong. Many people expressed anger at the U.S. government for giving money to other countries while ignoring needs at home. The rights of citizens were cited often, especially by men who felt the government should do something about "illegals" who were taking jobs meant for them and working for lower pay.

> "I think the government provides that job (at federal installations) for the people of San Antonio to make a living, but the contractor would rather hire someone for less so that they can pocket the money."
>
> "I'm not prejudiced. My grandfather came from Mexico in 1891, but I just can't see why we let all those Mexicans come out here. There are so many and not enough jobs."

Most of the frustration was directed toward companies and businesses which pitted citizens against the illegals, and not at the illegals themselves. Nevertheless, most felt that it was up to government to resolve the situation. (The interviews took place before implementation of the new immigration law could be felt.)

Several people expressed gratitude for what the government is already doing to help them or members of their family. The elderly were the most likely to have no complaints at all about government assistance. And nearly everyone interviewed had something good to say about the benefits they were receiving.

Jobs As The Solution To Poverty

Most felt that a job is the way out of poverty and that the government can assist by making sure jobs are available. Comments like "get me a job," or "create more jobs for the unemployed," were repeated over and over. In fact, three times as many people wanted to see the government create jobs as wanted increases in benefits when they were asked about the ultimate solution to poverty.

A closer examination of the circumstances of individuals interviewed provide insight into problems faced by the poorest people in our society and why "jobs" in and of themselves are not a complete solution.

Insecure And Sporadic Work

Most of those interviewed in San Antonio had been employed at the most marginal of jobs, if they were employed at all. Sporadic job tenure was a product of the weather, contracts, injuries and discrimination. The jobs were insufficient to lift families out of poverty, and public services and cash assistance failed to fill the gap.

Most, in describing either past or current employment, had held temporary, seasonal or part-time jobs. Earnings varied between $3.35 and $7.00 an hour ($6,968 to $14,560 annually *if* the person worked full-time, year-round, which was rarely the case). The jobs offered no fringe benefits—not even basic health insurance—and nearly all were in service, blue collar or farm sectors. Cook, hotel housekeeper, painter, construction laborer, carpenter and farm worker were the types of jobs frequently mentioned.

Nearly all respondents had been employed at some point in their lives. The number with *relatively* short periods of unemployment is evidence of the tenuousness of employment. At the time of the interviews, seven respondents and nine of their spouses were working. Another twelve had been unemployed for less than six months. Three persons each were unemployed for either 7–12 months or one to two years.

The situation was different for the 21 who had been out of the labor force for two years or more. They were mostly women with children, elderly or disabled people. Many of these, who could be considered long term poor, expressed the desire for jobs. But they needed child care, part-time or flexi-time jobs suitable to their ability or training.

Whether unemployed or working, they faced similar problems:

> "I hate having to go away from my house to work in the fields but the job my husband has requires us to do field work."

> "They laid me off. We have not worked for one month, because they go by seniority and those on probation are the first to go," said a hotel housekeeper. "Five have already quit and if I find another job, I'll not be going back."
>
> "I quit. My supervisor liked me but I didn't like him."
>
> "They were selling drugs and paying off the workers to be quiet about it. I didn't want any part of it, so I quit."

The experience of several men, who described themselves as self-employed highlights the in-and-out pattern of employment typical among the poor in the sample. Usually these men worked for small and medium sized construction contractors, who would hire them for short periods of time in order to complete specific jobs. They then lay them off when the project is completed.

In this situation workers are especially vulnerable to employment discrimination. They are placed in sharp competition for jobs with those in similar, impoverished circumstances. The case of one man (see box) exemplifies the difficulties of Hispanic males interviewed in San Antonio.

Most of those interviewed, do not believe that a person can support themselves on the minimum wage. Several commented that the minimum wage should be much higher.

> "I don't think (you can support yourself). Everything is so high, right now."
>
> "Not if you have a family to support."
>
> "Minimum wage is not enough. It should be more realistic. Five dollars is okay."
>
> "I think the government should pay eight dollars an hour."

Those who felt it was possible to support themselves on the minimum wage believed you had to accept a very low standard of living or work twice as hard. One woman said, "Yes, (it is possible) if more than one person is working."

The economic plight of the employed and unemployed was especially poignant when it appeared they might be eligible for more services than they were receiving. Explanations of why respondents weren't getting assistance included:

> "I don't think I qualify."
>
> "I tried once but it was too humiliating."
>
> "They don't treat me with respect."

One Man's Experience

"First, there aren't too many construction jobs around right now, and if there is, they are paying too low—like six, seven dollars an hour and I'm not in that category. I get a little bit more than that for my skill level. Some that will hire you for a low payment want you to do so much (more work) a day.

"I have been going to jobs but they have nothing but illegals working over there for less money. I think that the government provides that job for people here from San Antonio to make a living, but the contractors would rather hire someone for less, so they can pocket the money."

He accused former employers of wage and racial discrimination: "Oh yeah, (I have been affected by discrimination) on two jobs. The first time they wouldn't hire us. They hired Anglos. We went back two months later and they were still in the same space so the guy said, 'Okay, I'll hire you.'

"They were paying those Anglos eight dollars an hour. They started us off at $6.50. We went ahead and worked. We showed them. What we did in two weeks they didn't do in two months. When we had almost finished the job they laid us off."

The second time when a similar incident occurred he and other workers filed an employment discrimination complaint but were told they lacked adequate proof.

"How much proof do you need? My brother had been working there for fourteen months, I had been there for eight months and the other guy (an Anglo) had only been there for a month and he got to stay, but they laid us off."

This respondent, like many others in the sample, has been forced to come to grips with the need for further training. He explained that he is going back to school to learn drafting and how to read blueprints in order to compete for supervisory positions.

Disability Common And Often Job-Related

Like poor people in other interview sites, Hispanics in Texas exhibited a high degree of serious illness and disability which often went untreated. Much of it was caused or exacerbated by heavy manual labor and, when combined with the lack of basic educational skills, made it difficult or impossible to find another type of job.

Representing perhaps the most desperate picture of poverty in the sample were the 15 interviewees who had some illness or disability. Nearly half (22) of the fifty families had one or more member who is disabled or seriously ill.

The problems of those with illnesses was further complicated by their lack of health insurance and being unable to qualify for Medicaid. Only one out of seven interviewees who were employed received health insurance in connection with their jobs. Less than half of the sample were covered by Medicaid.

Comments made by those interviewed graphically depict the statistics of a survey conducted by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which found that Hispanics are much less likely than other groups to be admitted to hospitals even though they are afflicted by more sickness than the population as a whole. Hispanics were hospitalized thirty-four percent less frequently. The study goes on to say that the reason is that Hispanics are less likely to be insured.

Respondents had the following comments about their medical situations:

> "Well, I have a lot of illnesses. Lately I'm much better though. They have done all my cancer, that was the main problem. The thing is, I was on welfare for a year and I had Medicaid so I was going to the doctor. But since I got back with my husband, I don't have Medicaid so I don't go the doctor any more and I can't have check-ups because they charge too much. So I don't really know what kind of disability I have, but when I was going, he (the doctor) wouldn't let me work. I would mention work and he would get mad and wanted to throw the book at me."

> "I have a dislocated bone in my neck, and it has caused an infection in my throat and I have problems with my stomach," said one man who suffers from an anxiety condition. "They (the free clinic) gave me pills for it. I get nervous when it's too hot. I drink a lot of water and I cut my hair. They think I'm crazy, but its an excuse to fire me. It happens over and over. Social Security has been trying to help me for six months. If I find a job I will be re-cycled (and have to start all over again to seek medical assistance)."

> "He (my husband) cannot work like before. They don't call it disability. My husband had major surgery in his stomach and cannot do regular work, only light."

A substantial number of the injuries were job related usually affecting the breadwinner of the family. These men conveyed a sense of frustration at having worked all of their lives at grueling jobs—usually farm work—but now being unable to qualify for lighter work because they lacked the necessary education or training.

> "I'm not disabled according to the doctors. I can work to a certain extent, but sometimes I get severe back pains. When I don't have it I can work. The only time I get hired is for labor. They won't hire me for sheet metal work because of the insurance (the employer would have to pay against disability). I can't lie because they can look back on my record and I won't get hired. All I need is a chance."
>
> "I didn't know a back injury was that bad. I have had five operations. There is a series of X-rays, and they're painful, and then they (the doctors) judge you. They say this person is not sick, he just wants to get a lawsuit against us. It's a lot of pressure, and the wife is the one who carries the burden." Because this man appears to be fit, he said he encounters a lot of hostility from workers in agencies. "For a period of six years I had Social Security benefits coming to me but in 1983 they took them away. It took me a year to get them back."

Another man, completely disabled due to a broken back, cannot put in the sixty hours a week he once worked. The interviewer noted:

> "He displayed a strong belief that men who are healthy should work and work hard to support their families." This man went on to say, "I never asked the government for help, not even food stamps. I used to take my family and pick up cans and bottles, anything we could sell."

Benefits Are Low But Appreciated

More frequently than in any other states surveyed, respondents in Texas said raising benefit levels was the first thing they would do to change any of the 37 government programs they were asked about.

Two types of programs were discussed during interviews—cash assistance (including food stamps) and health, education and other social service programs. Respondents were asked to evaluate cash assistance programs in terms of what was the best and worst thing about them. Service programs were rated in terms of their helpfulness.

Perhaps because state-funded programs are so restrictive in Texas, interviewees there relied heavily on programs that are totally federally financed, especially food programs, but also Social Security disability and survivors' benefits. More frequently than in other states, Texas respondents answered that the "worst thing" about AFDC was that payments were so low.

In fact, AFDC benefits in Texas were lower than in any other state where the survey was conducted. The state ranks 49th in the maximum benefit for a family of three. Although families interviewed were larger than average, benefits received by respondents in San Antonio fell below $200 a month in 21 out of 23 instances. In contrast, less than half of the recipients in North Carolina (the second lowest benefit state) received monthly payments that low.

Comments voiced by many reflected frustration with inefficient management and bureaucracy as well as low benefit levels. Several people who were clearly eligible for programs simply gave-up, stopped trying to qualify because of the red tape and humiliation. Problems with the system vary depending upon the program, but AFDC was the subject of the most negative comments.

Respondents in Texas were four or five times more likely than those in the other states to suggest improvements in the staffing of public agencies so that personnel would be more courteous and effective. Nearly half of them said that they have needed cash, housing or medical assistance but did not apply because they thought they wouldn't qualify.

Nevertheless, there was a strong expression of gratitude for the programs that people did receive. Not a single person said they had participated in a cash benefit program that did not help them. Only five had received a service that they rated as unhelpful.

> "If it was not for housing (assistance), we would be with my mother or mother in-law or out on the street."
>
> "(Medicaid) helps because you can take children to any doctor for medical treatment."
>
> "There is nothing bad about Social Security. It helps out the family. It will put girls through school."
>
> "(AFDC) helps you out until you find a job."
>
> "I get enough (Social Security disability) even though I would rather be working. I feel lucky to get it."
>
> "I don't have to pay the medical bills or for medication (with Medicare)."

Food programs, especially food stamps, represented lifelines for the Texas sample. This was the only one of four survey sites where everyone interviewed had received food stamps at one time or another (78 percent were receiving them at the time of the interview). Participation rates were high for other food programs too. Of 50 respondents, 41 had children who received free school lunches, 37 had used food banks or soup kitchens, and 26 had been enrolled in the supplemental food program for women, infants and children (WIC).

> "If not for food stamps lots of people would be dying of hunger."
>
> "Food stamps help us out. We need them."
>
> "They help with groceries and allow us to use money for other things."
>
> "I couldn't afford to get the food I need without them."

Appreciation for assistance from AFDC and food stamps contributed to the feelings of the one-third of the Texas sample who said they would feel good about participating in a workfare program. They felt it would be a way to pay back the government for help received. The vast majority would rather participate in such a program if it incorporated education, job training, help finding a job or a guaranteed job at the end. All said they would be more likely to want to participate if they could get child care and other services. But a third of the present or past recipients said that they really could not be involved in a workfare program because they were either too old, disabled or had someone to take care of.

The Low Income Energy Assistance Program received the highest approval from the largest number of people. In fact, most respondents said "nothing" when asked what was the "worst thing" about the program. Supplemental Security Income and Social Security Disability, also received more compliments than complaints.

Problems With The Bureaucracy

Although people appreciated the help they receive from government programs, they also expressed frustration with the bureaucratic procedures necessary to receive this assistance.

> "AFDC is very manipulative. When workers lose the file you can't get a check. There is so much disorganization in the office and caseworkers are rude."
>
> "I don't like having to make three or four trips to the (AFDC) office with papers or having to wait there so long."
>
> "Caseworkers ask questions they shouldn't be asking. They hassle you."
>
> "I don't like the monthly payments. By the time you receive it, you owe it all."
>
> "I hate going to the office and having to make talk to incompetent imbeciles. They become an obstacle to the process."
>
> "Sometimes I don't receive them (food stamps) for 2 months. There is a lot of paperwork, the computer makes mistakes. It's a hassle."

Summary And Conclusion

San Antonio is one of a growing number of cities characterized by a large, in this case majority, Hispanic population. Although the economy is booming, many Hispanics are unable to take advantage of the prosperity due to their lack of educational skills. The jobs they occupy are not far from the farmwork that Mexican Americans performed in the past—unskilled work in the service sector. The poor, thus, are effectively banned from the higher-paying jobs in the new high technology and similar fields.

The state of Texas contributes relatively little to welfare programs. Its decision to withhold assistance from two-parent families is a particular hardship for the Hispanic population where there is a tendency toward early marriage and large families. As a result, families rely heavily on hard-pressed relatives and federally funded programs like food stamps. Both men and women feel strongly that mothers should be home with young children. But, when they want to go to work, the unavailability of child care causes great concern.

Health care is a particular problem because of the higher incidence of disability, often associated with back-breaking labor, among Hispanics. Many are unable to qualify for AFDC, a prerequisite for Medicaid coverage, and they hardly ever get health insurance from the temporary, part-time jobs available to them.

Healthy, skilled Hispanic men in San Antonio are often kept by discrimination from earning the kinds of wages they should be able to command. On the one hand, Anglos get preferential treatment, and, on the other, employers expect skilled Mexican Americans to work for the same low wages as undocumented immigrants.

This group of poor say they need education, training and jobs, and they believe the government has an obligation to help them. For those who survive on government assistance, higher benefit payments would be the most help.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Poverty In The Midst Of Plenty Washington, D.C.

by Gary Itzkowitz and Susan Rees

People living in poverty in the District of Columbia do so in the midst of a highly developed and prosperous economy. To a tourist, the District appears to be a beautiful and flourishing city, and in many ways it is. Impressive federal buildings and museums line many streets, and the National Park Service keeps monuments and parks clean and well-groomed. Large flower beds decorate the central part of the city almost year-round.

Washington is by far the wealthiest and most educated metropolitan area in the United States. The average after-tax household income in 1986 was $47,273, and one-third of all adults living in the area hold a college degree, a rate double the national average. The wealth of the population, and income generated by tourism, keep many restaurants, hotels, and other service and leisure industries thriving.

The city has often been considered "recession proof" because of its large federal workforce, although public sector jobs declined slightly and private sector employment increased by over 25 percent between 1981–85. Much of the private sector growth has been in professional services—lawyers, doctors, accountants, consultants and others.

The Washington area also has the highest proportion of working women in the country and is the only metropolitan area where average black household income is above $20,000. Only Boston has a lower unemployment rate. And the Washington metropolitan area has the lowest poverty rate in the United States.

A clear distinction should me made, however, between the metropolitan area, which includes Virginia and Maryland suburbs, and the District of Columbia proper which has a population of less than one million. Within the city limits disparities between rich and poor abound. The poverty rate (16 percent) and unemployment rate (6.4 percent) are higher than the national average.

Washington does not have the high-rise ghettos that characterize much of the current discussion of the "urban underclass." But the D.C. infant mortality rate ranks highest in the nation. Deinstitutionalization at St. Elizabeth's hospital is flooding the streets with mentally ill persons who have no place to live and exacerbating an already acute problem of homelessness. Poor people walk the same wide avenues that are dotted with limousines, chic boutiques and some of the most expensive hotels in the country.

The population of the District is predominantly black (70 percent). While many blacks have moved into the upper echelons of every social and economic sector, many remain in poverty. The poorest blacks live in the southeast quadrant, but also populate other sections of the city alongside poor Central American refugees, poor whites and more affluent whites who are moving into newly renovated areas.

According to the interviews, most jobs available to the least-skilled, least-educated and poorest Washingtonians, are in the hotel, food service, restaurant, retail and other service sectors. They are low-wage (though not necessarily minimum wage jobs), frequently part-time or shift work, and carry few, if any, benefits.

Many newly created jobs are located outside of the District in suburban areas that have been successful in attracting high tech and retail development. However, as a result of low unemployment rates and a high percentage of white collar, technical workers, suburban centers have not been able to fill clerical and service positions. It is reported that the District's poor and unemployed are inhibited from taking the suburban jobs because of a lack of skills, training and transportation. A rush-hour trip from Southeast Washington to Tysons Corner, the booming hub in the Virginia suburbs where many entry level jobs are available, takes about an hour and a half by bus and rail and costs $1.60. Suburban employers are reportedly recruiting construction workers and others from distant states.

Even the working poor have great difficulty finding decent, affordable housing. Many traditional low and moderate income neighborhoods have been "gentrified," and are out of the reach of the District's less affluent residents. The Metro subway system, which makes transportation within the city easy and affordable, does not yet go to many areas with the most transit-dependent people in the city, such as the primarily black areas of the district southeast of the Anacostia River.

Sample Design And Demographics

The survey was conducted with 50 persons in Washington, D.C. The Washington sample focused on issues important to several groups who are poor for different reasons. The sample was selected particularly to represent women heads of household living on AFDC, minority male youth and disabled persons. The sample approximates the age, race and sex of the low income population in Washington D.C. Two-thirds were women, and over half had received AFDC at some time.

Most respondents were beneath the poverty line, although data was also gathered from those who had been poor at some time and now are considered "success stories." Since poverty is transitory for many, the sample also contained a few respondents who had moved above the poverty line.

In conducting the survey, it became clear that poverty in the District is a minority problem. It was difficult to find poor white persons within the city boundaries, with the exception of white disabled and single males who were homeless. Poor two-parent families of any race were almost impossible to find within the District boundaries. Poor Hispanic residents were easier to locate, but all were Central American refugees. The sample was 71 percent black, and the remaining 29 percent was divided almost equally between whites and Hispanics.

An effort was made to include respondents of all ages, with a particular focus on younger people. Twenty-three of the 50 respondents were under age 25 (three under age 18). Six were over age 61.

Basic Welfare Programs

Three-fourths of the capital's poor receive some form of cash assistance—AFDC, Supplemental Security Income or General Assistance.

Payments under various entitlement programs are relatively generous in the District compared to other study sites, but rank near the median for all states. The average monthly AFDC benefit of $299 amounts to only 41 percent of the official poverty line for a family of three.

The city allows two-parent families to receive benefits when the principal wage earner is unemployed and the family meets other criteria. No workfare program had been enacted at the time the interviews were conducted, but able bodied AFDC recipients with children over age six were required to register with WIN. Many in the sample had experience with WIN-funded training programs.

General Assistance is funded entirely by the D.C. government and is intended for childless individuals and couples between 18 and 65 years of age who are unable to work due to short-term disability; permanently disabled persons and those on a waiting list for Supplemental Security Income; and children under 18 who are unsupported by parents or relatives.

The federal food stamp program is the largest food and nutrition program operating in the District of Columbia. Due to stiffer federal eligibility requirements there has been a 20 percent decrease in participation between 1982–85, with an average monthly allotment of $109. During the same period, emergency cash assistance recipients quadrupled and soup kitchens, food pantries and shelters have been flooded with requests for assistance.

The 74,000 elderly in the District make up 11.6 percent of the population. SSI payments go to 4,000 poor elderly and 12,000 poor disabled residents. The city augments the basic federal benefit by $15, resulting in a maximum SSI payment of $355 per month for an individual.

Subsidized housing in the District amounts to 10.5 percent of the housing stock and 16 percent of the rental housing units. Public housing is the largest source of subsidized housing, and the District operates 11, 732 units. With no new funding for federally financed construction of public housing units, the 13,000 people on waiting lists must wait until others move from existing units.

Another source of housing assistance is the federal Section 8 Rental Assistance Program which pays the difference between the fair market rent and 30 percent of the tenants' income. The Section 202 program targeted for the elderly and handicapped is linked with Section 8 assistance.

For Some Work Is Not Possible

Problems for many families and individuals can grow and multiply beyond their ability to cope, wiping out their fragile support mechanisms and limited reserves. Under such circumstances even economically stable families need to turn to welfare. This is especially true if illness or disability of a family member is one of a combination of setbacks. The problem is particularly serious if the breadwinner becomes ill.

One 69-year-old woman had an accident in 1952 that seriously injured her hip and required 23 operations. While she is able to get around with a cane and has been employed part-time since 1978, there was a time in her life when she simply could not work, but she didn't apply for general assistance for years because people told her that she wouldn't qualify. She was childless and at the time was married, but abandoned by her husband. It took her five years after her accident to apply for welfare assistance. Looking back, she says:

> "I don't know how I managed. I know I have been so honest to God hungry till I have been too weak to get up out of bed . . . I wish I was able to work eight hours, but it is hard for me since they changed the transportation system. I have to walk way down there and then when I get off the bus to go to work I have to walk a block and a half. Its hard. With the one leg two and a half inches shorter than the other leg it hurts my back. Of course, I suffered with arthritis so bad . . . but I tries . . . Welfare was pure damn hell."

Another family suffered enormously when the husband fell and injured his back. He was in a body cast for six weeks and the wife's life was so disrupted in her attempts to care for him and their two children that her own job attendance as a maintenance worker faltered. She was continuously criticized by her superviior, and eventually quit. The sudden loss of income led to the family losing their apartment and going on welfare. The family lived with a succession of relatives and friends and finally, when temporary accommodations were exhausted, she and her two children turned to a homeless shelter. Each day she and the children were expected to check out, even if they expected to return in the evening. They had to carry most of their belongings with them as the mother continued a search for a job and a new apartment.

After two months of this life, she managed to get an apartment and now has a job that pays the minimum wage. Her husband is able to return to work sporadically as well. She now feels that her life is coming back together, but worries that without Medicaid she will not be able to care for her son who has had medical problems.

Other families have had similar experiences. One respondent has a disease of the eye which will ultimately end in blindness; a spastic colon, inflammatory bowels and ulcers. Another respondent suffered a gunshot wound, which creates chronic back pain, and also has a deteriorating ankle which reduces her mobility. In yet another family, the husband has sickle cell anemia and the wife has epilepsy. The wife had been given medicine to control seizures, but later found she was allergic to the pills.

In these cases, and others collected as part of this study, the story might have been different if the individuals involved had not been in or near poverty and lacking any savings or disposable income. Without savings a problem can become a crisis. It is impossible to pay the rent if you have to leave your job, find a day care substitute when your babysitter gets sick or quits, or to buy medicine when a health problem flares up.

Intensive Help Needed For Some

The survey found several AFDC recipients who, like some people in all economic classes, are afflicted with problems which psychologists define as personality disorders. They exhibit emotional and behavioral patterns which detract from their ability to be hired.

Though probably only a minority of AFDC recipients, some would put them in the category of "long-term" recipients. They have been isolated and out of the workforce for several decades and, in fact, are facing the prospect, now that their children are nearly grown, of another ten to twenty years before they can qualify for old age benefits. Like the others, their lives are complicated by physical health problems and the need to piece things together the best they can to survive. Like the others also, they see employment as their main avenue out of poverty.

But, besides basic education, skills training, child care, health care and transportation, these few need intensive personal therapy to achieve the kind of demeanor and behavior sought by employers. One white mother of three, for example, talked incessantly and disjointedly for over four hours during the interview. The interviewer thought she would need much more help than the usual "job club" that is offered as personal support for long-term recipients entering the workforce after long periods. The emotional problems she described with one of her children indicated an extremely unstable emotional environment. She pointed to her obesity, and said she needed dental work, suitable work clothes, and a wrist watch if she were to go to work. "Once you get on welfare," she said, "If you're on welfare for 5 or 6 years it tends to be addicting, like you're addicted to drugs. You get to the point you're almost scared to go out in the world."

Welfare Programs: Adequate And Reliable Benefits Needed

Most of the low income people interviewed, when asked for ideas to improve the programs that serve them, said they thought benefit levels should be increased for AFDC, food stamps, and general assistance. There was an acute sense that the payments received were barely enough to live on.

One interviewer noted a poignant moment when an interview was interrupted because a mother became upset when one of her five children went to the refrigerator for a glass of milk. In reprimanding the child, the mother reminded her that she had already had milk in the morning. The unspoken reason for the mother's discomfort was that one glass of milk a day was all the family could afford.

Frequently, public benefit programs were described in the same words:

> "It's not enough. It's just something for two or three weeks. For the rest of the month you have nothing."

Another complaint about the welfare system in the District of Columbia was that a trip to the welfare office is often a nerve-wracking ordeal. Even though appointments are mandatory, respondents said they usually had to wait for hours to see a caseworker and that when they finally succeeded in doing so the caseworkers were rude and unhelpful. Others complained that checks were often late and that reductions were made without prior notification. Some of the criticisms seemed to be a commentary on the extensive rules that govern the program, but others seemed to arise from the lack of respect with which people felt they were treated.

The comment, "too much hassle for a little bit of money," best captures the sentiment of most about the bureaucracy in the District of Columbia. One person called the office "a combat zone," and several said caseworkers acted as if they were giving away money out of their own pockets.

> "The whole program has problems. People there don't have patience; it takes three or four hours before they put your application in. They are uncooperative in terms of providing information."

> "They cut your check off and don't let you know about it. When you make an appointment to see about it you have to wait four hours. Sometimes you can't even get in. Caseworkers talk very nasty and have a nasty attitude; they tell too many lies."

> "Every six months or so it changes. Sometimes it is cut and sometimes they cut you off and you have to be recertified. When you go to be recertified it takes so long. So they give you $21 and you have to go down there every two or three days. You ain't got no money to go (by bus). It is helpful when they (the benefits) come but the workers have to put themselves in our place sometimes."

The current welfare system was also criticized as not providing a real escape from poverty. People suggested that training and services were needed in addition to monthly benefit checks.

> "Public assistance benefits don't really help people. They are just bandaid approaches. They do help you in that they are better than nothing, but although they provide you with something there is so much more that is needed. Sometimes I feel like, 'don't bite the hand that feeds you.' You can easily become dependent because there is no incentive to really help people who want to get or do more, yet what it does provide is not enough."

People were extremely grateful for the help they received from Medicaid. "One nice thing (about Medicaid), one mother observed, is that in contrast to the other programs "you are automatically eligible when you qualify for AFDC." The low number of negative comments about Medicaid may flow as much from the sense of security and reliability as from the sense that its benefits are generally adequate:

> "It's been very convenient to know I can take my daughter to the doctor. It's really helped me through the years for her shots and everything. I don't know what I would do without it."

The most positive reactions toward welfare in general, and AFDC especially, came from several youth who had been on the program as children. For one young woman, welfare enabled her brothers and sisters to stay together when her mother's job was transferred to another state. Another youth suggested that welfare "put food on the table and clothes on my back" when her parents separated.

Desire For Independence Through Decent Jobs

Both the working poor and those receiving help from welfare programs agreed that the best way of achieving the self-sufficiency they desired was through attaining decent jobs.

> "When you have a job and are able to be independent, you feel better about yourself. You have pride and control of your family and where your income is coming from."

Virtually none of those surveyed found benefits from government programs a positive alternative. One disabled white man expressed a common attitude and aspiration when he said welfare programs were–

> ". . . between the point of oblivion where you are out on the street (and the point) where you can, if given the chance, better yourself and have some type of decent living in the future."

If low income people are clear about the desire to work—when asked what kind of work she aspired to find, one single mother receiving AFDC replied, "A job, any job"—they are also clear about the necessity of working their way towards a job that pays enough to support their families adequately. When asked what they would do to change their present jobs, many said they would like more income and increased benefits.

> "My income is too low. I'd like to live more comfortably, have my own home, so I and my daughter would be truly independent."

> "If the economy is in a recession, then I'm going to lose my job. Basically the job I hold now isn't a secure job."

Virtually all of those questioned believed it was impossible to support a family adequately on a minimum wage job.

> "I was a waitress and barely making it. I had to live at the 'Y.' and then with friends."

> "If I had a minimum wage job, I'd be even poorer than I am now."

However, welfare recipients wouldn't mind a minimum wage job if it offered a prospect for advancement.

> "It would be encouraging if they gave us a chance. I would change the promotional system. When other openings develop in the hotel (front desk clerk), housekeepers are the last to know about it."

Interaction Between Jobs And Government Programs

What was most striking about those who were working was the fragility of their economic situation. One woman, in her 50's who has raised her eight children along over the past 39 years, has worked for the past 13 years at a day care center and has also managed to take courses toward her college degree. Even so, she currently earns only $8,986 per year and she does not have a retirement plan.

Others find that their attempts to move away from the welfare system jeopardize the basic supports of food and health care. The food stamp program provides one example. If a person takes a short-term job, the temporary or modest increase in earnings can immediately disqualify them for food stamps. Low income people are well aware of the time lag associated with going off and on a welfare program. Thus, if a job does not work out, the former recipient must face a considerable time period with no means other than food pantries to feed the family.

Another program upon which low income people depend is Medicaid. Many of those interviewed—those with disabilities themselves and those who were responsible for caring for sick family members—said they could not afford to go back to work and lose their eligibility for Medicaid coverage. One such mother has two young children, one with asthma and one with a chronic ear infection and allergies. The children need regular medical attention, including frequent IVs and use of a lung machine. The service sector jobs available to the mother would not supply enough income and medical coverage to ensure that her children were cared for adequately.

> "For AFDC mothers or even single mothers on general public assistance, there is no counseling—job counseling or personal counseling assistance—for transition (into employment), and some will say 'I don't want to risk getting out there getting a job for three months or six months. I might end up being totally on my own with no assistance.' They will be out of the safety net. It is unfair for people to expect people on welfare to give up that safety net when people on jobs are looking for that safety net as well."

Those with jobs faced similar difficulties. One man, even though he was able to obtain health insurance, had great difficulty making the out-of-pocket costs of accumulated hospital bills. Other respondents said:

> "The reason I lost my job was that I missed work for my eye examinations. They told me I couldn't miss any more work, but when I did, the job was gone."

"The main thing about working is that they cut off Medicaid after nine months. If I had a minimum wage job there is no way I could afford this medicine for my high blood pressure."

"I got let go from my part-time job because they were afraid I would get hurt since I was pregnant. I would have stayed on the job, but the restaurant owner didn't want me to stay. He said I could have my job back after having the baby. When I called them they said they didn't need part-time help anymore."

For others, a barrier to employment is not having adequate child care. Those with children—single mothers especially—have found that an essential support for full-time employment is the availability of reliable, good, affordable child care. Without it they have no choice but to continue to work in the home. Twenty percent of the respondents lost their jobs because of child care related problems.

"I could be working if I could find a baby sitter. I need someone to care for my baby."

Relevance Of Education Questioned

While the development of job-related skills was seen as essential to achieving independence, those surveyed were not always convinced of the relevance of a formal education to success in the job market.

"(Success through education) depends on the person. A person must want to make something out of themselves. There are people without education who wanted to make something out themselves and did. There are also people with education who have done nothing with their lives."

Generally, older people—those with more experience in trying to get jobs—placed more importance on education.

"Not having an education handicaps you in a lot of ways. You have to take menial jobs like a bus boy or street cleaner. You can't even compete for a job, and you spend your time on the bottom of the totem pole. At one time you could get a job without education, but not now."

For many, dropping out of school had relatively little to do with the direct school experience. The most commonly given reason for leaving school was a family or other problem at home.

"I was a high achiever, but my father wasn't satisfied. I dropped out because of pressure from my father. My parents were divorced and I was the go-between. If I had a counselor, or support system outside of my parents, I might have stayed."

For some respondents, the reason for leaving school had to do with the need to get a job, either because of changes in family fortunes or because they had become parents.

Said one young man who went to work before he had planned:

> "My girlfriend had just had a baby and I wanted to get job training and a different kind of schooling so I could make some money. If my mother hadn't moved away (in search of a job) and pushed me (to get a job) I might have stayed in school."

> "I interrupted my studies for nearly three years to care for my daughter. When I returned to high school I was solely responsible for my daughter."

For other respondents, the reason for leaving school had to do with the need to take care of a sick family member. Several people had alcoholic parents who disrupted their education and others said that family problems resulted in their leaving home and school simultaneously.

Effective Training Desired

More than education, most respondents felt that training was the key to breaking out of poverty and into a good job. Even so, respondents were disappointed with much of the training they received.

> "I think the program should have had some kind of qualifying exam to see what kind of skill I had and then placed me in a program that could sharpen those skills. Basically, all I did was maintenance work, mopping."

> "I didn't have an instructor for the first 4–6 weeks of training. The program was designed to learn basic reading, writing and arithmetic in order to pass the civil service examination. Once I complained they gave us an instructor who was not equipped to teach us. Of the 200 students in that training only 40 or 50 passed the civil service test."

> "My counselor didn't give me the support I needed. She only made the appointment for me to be at the training. I wasn't told about the length of stay at the site and I had to go and see my doctor and I would miss sessions. They dropped me from the program so I called my counselor several times and she said that she forgot that I had called. My case was closed. Then they sent me a letter saying I could contact them if there was anything else they could do for me."

> "I took cosmetology training. I know how to cut hair but that is about all. The teacher wouldn't let me practice on real hair. The teacher wasn't helpful enough. She was too busy."

> "My training didn't help me. There was only basic instruction given. They didn't have the necessary equipment for auto-body repair."

Several people told of their disappointment about having been through multiple training programs but finding no jobs available.

> "I would change the training programs. I would make them, well, change them to keep pace with society. People go through programs to obtain a skill and then find out there are no jobs for the skill."

> "There are so many computers and high technology products in offices nowadays that even to take a secretary or receptionist position, you have to be trained in the use of advanced machines. There are few jobs that don't require this type of work, so without that training you are not likely to find work."

> "I am unable to pass the physical exams to accept jobs that I have been trained for and qualify for. Jobs that don't demand so much physically mean that I have to have advanced training and that is limited."

Training, then, is viewed with high hopes, but those hopes are quickly dashed if that training does not link people to jobs. Too often, low income people report little connection between the skills they were taught and the skills needed in the job market, or little connection between the skills they were promised and the skills they actually received.

Care for the young is also an essential support for mothers who want to complete training courses that will broaden job opportunities. Time and again, respondents alluded to child care as a major hurdle to be passed. One woman applied for training through WIN even though she was not required to because the youngest of her four children was only four years old. While the training program paid a reimbursement for child care, the after-school day care program would not admit a child so young, and she was unable to find adequate care from any other public or private source. As a result, she never entered the training program.

Finally, a strong need was stated for transportation services. The cost of transportation greatly reduces the ability of low income people to obtain available jobs, particularly when the job pays only the minimum wage. The availability of child care and transportation support services would have a direct and positive impact on the successful completion of training and on becoming employed.

The Precarious Confidence Of Black Youth

Young black males had a high degree of confidence that they would be able to make it on their own. They had ambitions for getting a college education and getting a good job. Familiar with the drug scene that is pervasive in the city, youth told interviewers they were tired of seeing businessmen and public officials coming around all the time to buy drugs, and at the same time preaching to them to "say no to drugs."

The struggle to continue schooling was evident but circumstances easily intervene. One boy, who had just been informed by the girlfriend he hadn't seen in months that he had become a father, was about to go looking for work so he could support his infant daughter. He was sorry this would probably interrupt his education:

> "I (had) promised my father I wouldn't drop out. I told him even if I was held back I'd be there until I was an old man. I'd stay just to get that piece of paper so I could get a job."

Young men did say they felt responsible for supporting their children, as long as they knew they were the father, but they still resented the idea of having to discontinue their education. About half of the mothers under age 25, in fact, receive some form of child support, though rarely regular formal payments. The reasons the others did not were usually that the men, for one reason or another, had not been told they were fathers. "He is selling drugs, and I don't want to be involved in that," one 19-year-old mother said. Others didn't know where the father was. Another said the father at first disputed the child was his. He now tries to "be a father," though he has another family and comes to her with his problems with his second wife.

One high school student was struggling because he had gotten behind the others in his class when he was younger. At that time he shared a bedroom with his mother, brother and sister, and he would be "teased at school when roaches used to crawl out of my lunch sack." At the age of 14, he left home with his brother and started living with a family down the block. "I told my little brother we were going to make it ourself and go to school like we should."

Another prided himself on having received his GED even though he has been unable to secure a job because he has no work experience to make his applications stand out among the many others that are filed for each opening.

One striking finding of the D.C. sample is the extent to which males, especially those under 25, rarely participated in social service programs of any kind. The vast majority of female respondents of the same age have used either a health clinic or a food distribution service, and many have used both. But fewer than half the males of the same age have been to a health clinic and only a scattering have received food from distribution centers. The difference may be attributable to the fact that most female respondents in this age group had children, and children are the focus of many government programs. But it may also indicate a problem of too little outreach to young men.

One impression left by the survey was that young black youth are divorced from many of society's institutions. With the exception of programs that are mainly correctional in nature, little seems to be done to help them capitalize on their ambitions.

Another impression was that young women who had become mothers were cognizant of the little earnings potential of the father and other young men around them. They often seemed more satisfied to support themselves and/or to rely on the help of their parents. This attitude is borne out in statistics recently compiled by the Children's Defense Fund. The study concludes that since 1973, the earnings of men age 20–24 fell by 30 percent, and their marriage rate has declined by half.

Social Service Programs: It Is Not Only Cash That Matters

Most of those surveyed said they were helped by federally funded service programs intended to help disadvantaged people. Food programs, in particular, were widely used by the working poor and those receiving cash assistance. Food distribution centers had been a link in the chain of survival for more than one welfare mother, a teenage runaway and a mentally ill man living in a group home.

One important reason for positive feelings about non-cash programs seems to be that these programs are seen as focused on people "in need" rather than on those who meet strict eligibility regulations. The vast majority of respondents in Washington have used many of the 21 non-cash services included on the survey, and only ten indicated any criticism of such programs. Services used ranged from Head Start to meals on wheels, from maternal child health and WIC to Summer Youth Employment and Legal Services.

The most widely used social services provided food or health care. Over half the group had participated in a food distribution service and in the free school lunch program. And nearly that many reported visiting a free health clinic.

When asked to suggest changes in programs, several recommendations called for more integration of services, including at the neighborhood level as opposed to large central welfare offices. Others thought low income people could be helped by such things as financial and home management counseling.

Other Survey Findings

- Respondents were more likely to point to some personal deficiency—lack of education or training, poor health, etc.—rather than the economy as the reason for being unemployed.
- Despite the desire to work, the low income people in the sample tended to have long bouts of unemployment. AFDC recipients' average length of unemployment was five years compared to four years for all those who are now unemployed or out of the labor force.
- A large portion of the sample, especially young women living on public assistance, felt a significant loss of independence due to the need to share housing with others. Respondents feel an acute lack of affordable housing and that they need to share expenses that welfare and low wages do not cover.
- While waiting lists are several years long, those who live in public housing were generally satisfied with the affordable rents and physical conditions.
- Nearly two-thirds of the sample indicated that they have participated in a community, self-help or church group, with almost half holding leadership positions. Although this involvement rarely led directly to employment, many respondents suggested that community activities gave a sense of self-worth that will be important in their future employment.
- Over three-quarters of the survey respondents said their economic situation got worse after giving birth to their first child because they had to shoulder more responsibilities, go to work or work harder.
- The sample was divided over the willingness to enter a workfare program. A majority said they did not like the idea of working as a condition of receiving benefits, but many said they would because at least it would be some kind of job. When support services and training were suggested as part of such a program, the positive response rose to over 80 percent, and when child care and transportation costs were included the positive response was 100 percent.
- The overwhelming majority agreed that parents, especially fathers, should contribute to the support of their children. Thirteen out of 29 mothers indicated that there was someone who should be paying regular child support but wasn't. There was also strong resentment of slow, ineffective court procedures.

Summary And Conclusions

Like most Americans, poor people worry about their children and have aspirations for decent jobs. Having little savings or disposable income, though, the poor are less able to deal with unanticipated calamities like an accident or loss of a job.

For welfare recipients, the risk of employment can be immense. Moving into a job with low pay, few if any benefits and no guarantee that it will last, means you can lose health coverage altogether. If you lose the job, it could be months before you can get back on welfare and receive Medicaid. In their search for independence, some have taken the risk and some have suffered as a result.

Welfare recipients experience many hurdles in establishing and maintaining eligibility for public assistance. Their recommendations to change the system include:

- Increased AFDC, general assistance and food stamp benefits;
- Outreach and greater access to information for those who need assistance, including posting the hours and locations of food banks so that people know where to go if they are denied eligibility or need to supplement current assistance;
- Automatic public assistance and food stamp eligibility upon expiration of unemployment benefits;
- Access to job and training opportunities;
- Better enforcement of child support laws;
- Reduction in the time between application and determination of eligibility;
- Issuance of welfare checks (for the same overall amount) twice rather than once a month to lessen the chance that money will not be available at the end of the month;
- Additional training for caseworkers in crisis management;
- Increased income disregard for adolescents in part-time or summer jobs so that the family doesn't lose benefits.

Respondents uniformly stated their desire to work and almost all have some work experience, but their decisions about employment are made in light of what is best for their families.

The elderly minority population provide clear examples of what a lifetime of low-paying, no benefit jobs can bring. A new study prepared for the House Select Committee on Aging by the National Caucus and Center on Black Aged, reports that one in three elderly blacks lives below the poverty line, at least in part because of inadequate income and benefits when they were working. Some were not covered by Social Security and others had no retirement provisions. In turn, this has led to poor housing conditions, poor health and high risk as crime victims. It seems logical to conclude that even if health, child care, and transportation needs can all be successfully obtained by the working poor, they are likely to spend their elderly years in poverty.

Clearly, others in the sample cannot be expected to work, at least for a period of time. They are in need of a welfare system that provides adequate benefits, a measure of reliability and predictability, and to be treated with respect when they are forced to seek help.

Those interviewed generally reported having to turn to income support programs under stressful situations—the loss of a job or spouse, homelessness, mental or physical illness. In the scramble to make up the difference between benefits received and the money needed to pay for food, housing, clothes, and other necessities, many of the respondents had to give up the idea of having their own home.

In these situations access to information was seen as a valuable service. Providing information about sources of assistance, posting the hours and locations of food banks in welfare offices so people can know where to go if they are denied help or need to supplement current assistance, teaching recipients how to budget, reducing the time between application and determination of eligibility and improving outreach to those who need assistance were all suggestions by respondents. With more information comes a sense of dignity and of control that is otherwise lacking in a system where everybody else seems to have the answers.